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# Appropriate Social Behavior: Teaching Expectations to Young Children

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## Abstract

Young children's challenging behavior can impact all aspects of the classroom environment, including relationships (peer-peer, student-teacher), learning, and safety. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a program that focuses on supporting pro-social behaviors and preventing challenging behavior. PBIS begins with building a foundation of universal practices and creating a common language that teachers, children, and families can use to talk about behavior. The identification and defining of appropriate behavioral expectations and the systematic teaching of those behavioral expectations is paramount to preventing challenging behavior. This article describes the steps involved in identifying classroom behavioral expectations and the development of developmentally appropriate lesson plans to teach those behaviors to young children.

*Keywords:* positive behavior support, expectations, rules, teaching

## Appropriate Social Behavior: Teaching Expectations to Young Children

*Ms. Teresa is gearing up to begin her third year as a full-time preschool teacher. This year she will again have a class of 3-year-olds, most of who will be starting their first schooling experience. Although some of the children will have attended daycare, many of them will not have spent any time with a group of same-age peers. Ms. Teresa loves working with the children and planning activities but she is still somewhat nervous about the start of a new year. Her number one concern, “hands down, is dealing with children’s challenging behavior”. She has tried numerous strategies but hasn’t found anything that really works and constantly struggles with getting her assistant teacher and volunteers in the classroom to follow-through.*

Many early childhood teachers feel the same as Ms. Teresa. Teachers know that children’s challenging behavior can impact every aspect of a classroom including peer relationships, academic learning and safety. It is no wonder that teachers have reported children’s challenging behavior as their greatest concern (Alkon, Ramler, & MacLennan, 2003; Joseph & Strain, 2003). In fact, Head Start teachers have reported that up to 40% of their students used challenging behavior at least once every day (Willoughby, Kupersmidt, & Bryant, 2001).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which is being implemented more frequently in early childhood settings, is a proactive prevention program that focuses on promoting social-emotional development, supporting the use of adaptive, pro-social behaviors, and preventing challenging behavior (Horner, 2000; Powell & Dunlap, 2006). PBIS applies a

three-tiered model that focuses on creating consistent, predictable, positive and safe environments for all children. At the first tier, universal promotion practices focus on building positive relationships with children, families and other professionals as well as building high quality supportive environments for young children (Tier 1; Fox & Hemmeter, 2009). The advanced tiers focus on providing explicit instruction in social skills (Tier 2), and providing intensive, individualized interventions and supports for children with persistent challenging behavior (Tier 3; Fox & Hemmeter).

Implementation of a comprehensive PBIS program begins with building a foundation of universal promotion practices at Tier 1. Identifying, teaching, and supporting appropriate behavioral expectations is a primary component of this process (Stormont, Lewis & Beckner, 2005). This article will outline the considerations and steps involved in identifying classroom behavioral expectations and developing lesson plans to teach those behaviors systematically to young children.

### **Defining Expectations**

Clearly defining classroom expectations creates a common language that teachers, children, and families can use in the classroom environment. It provides a positive way to talk about behavior and increases the frequency with which adults catch students being good rather than catching them not meeting expectations (Fox & Hemmeter, 2009). There are two major steps involved in clearly defining classroom expectations that can be implemented consistently: (a) identifying broad expectations, and (b) defining specific examples. Broad expectations identify the major behaviors we want to see from members of our classroom community (both children and adults). They can almost be described as overarching character traits that we want all students to demonstrate. Often these broad expectations are selected by brainstorming the

developmentally appropriate expectations that teachers have for students and then categorizing those into a small number of expectations that encompass everything (Benedict, Horner, & Squires, 2007). These broad expectations give us the language of our classroom and help to shape the specific rules that we expect across classroom settings and routines. The next step involves specifically defining what those broad expectations look like across the classroom environment. These specific examples represent our classroom rules. They are important to define because while the expectations give us our classroom language, they do not look the same across all settings. For example, consider the expectation “We Take Care of Ourselves.” Taking care of ourselves in the classroom may include specific rules such as using walking feet and sitting square in our chair whereas on the playground it might include such rules as sliding on your bottom and using walking feet on the pavement. Expectations can be seen as an umbrella that represents the global characteristics or character traits that we want to see children display whereas rules are encompassed under the umbrella and represent specific examples for what those expectations look like across settings.

### **Step 1: Identifying Broad Expectations**

An important step in teaching children behavioral expectations is defining what they are. There are several considerations for defining expectations. First, the number of expectations should be kept small. With school age children, teachers are encouraged to focus on no more than five expectations. With preschool-age children, that number should be even smaller (Stormont, Lewis & Beckner, 2005). Typically, preschool classrooms focus on two to four expectations. Second, expectations should include words that children can understand, recognizing that children will also be taught directly what these words mean throughout the teaching process. Third, expectations should be positively worded and focus on what you want

children to do as opposed to what you want them to stop doing. For example, expectations might read “Be Safe” as opposed to “Don’t Run Inside.” Finally, expectations should cover the range of appropriate behaviors that you want to see from children. Expectations should address the noise level and movement inside as well as interactions with property, with peers, and with adults.

As Ms. Teresa considered the developmentally appropriate expectations and character traits that she wanted to see from the children in her preschool classroom, she settled on the following three classroom behavioral expectations: (a) We Take Care of Our Friends, (b) We Take Care of Ourselves, and (c) We Take Care of Our School (see Figure 1). Ms. Teresa decided upon these three expectations because she felt as though they covered the range of behaviors she wanted to see in her classroom, including how children treat themselves, others and the school. She also felt that she could easily encompass noise levels and movement in the school within these expectations. Finally, she believed that these expectations used words that the children would already be familiar with and that they would be easy to remember (both for her and for her students).

Ms. Teresa felt as though these broad classroom expectations were like character traits. Her hope is that the children in her classroom will be the type of individuals who take care of their friends, themselves and the environments in which they spend time. Identifying this small number of broad, memorable expectations is helpful for building a positive classroom culture and creating a common language that all adults and children can use. However, it is also necessary to define more specifically what these broad expectations look like across settings and routines.

## **Step 2: Defining Specific Examples (Rules)**

The next step is to clearly define specific examples of what it looks like to meet the broad behavioral expectations across common settings and routines. In elementary, middle and high schools, this is often done by considering the different settings or environments in the school such as the cafeteria, hallways, bathroom, and classroom. In early childhood settings, young children often spend much of their day in the classroom but participate in distinctly different classroom routines. It may be appropriate in early childhood settings to define these expectations across common classroom routines as well as settings.

Ms. Teresa focused on five distinct settings or routines as she began clearly defining her classroom expectations. She focused on: (a) circle time in the classroom, (b) bathroom, (c) outside, (d) mealtime, which takes place in the classroom, and (e) pick-up/bus. She chose to include both distinct settings and a couple distinct routines within her classroom environment. Other settings or routines you may want to consider including are the classroom in general, free choice/free play time, the hallway, the gymnasium, music room or multi-purpose room, or any other setting or routine that looks distinctly different from others. Ms. Teresa used a behavior expectation matrix to outline what specific behaviors in each setting or routine represent the broad expectations (see Figure 1).

The first step in developing a behavior expectation matrix is to list the small number of positively worded classroom expectations you developed across the top row. Next, think through the typical routines and settings where children spend their time each day. Your goal is to clearly identify what it looks like to meet the expectations across a child's day.

Once you have identified your classroom expectations and the routines and settings where children spend time, you should think through what specific behaviors you want to see in each setting. Think first about what you want to see children do. It can also be helpful to think



about those challenging behaviors that you often see. Do your examples address all of the challenging behaviors you see? For example, if you often see children climbing up the slide on the playground, you may want to be sure to include a rule for climbing up the stairs and sliding down the slide. Remember to keep your specific examples worded positively as well. Our goal should always be to tell children what we want them to do.

There is no right number of examples to include in each cell. Think about what it would take to cover the appropriate expectations. Have you represented all of the setting or routine-specific rules without being so lengthy that your students, and perhaps even you, won't be able to remember them?

The matrix that you just made is the perfect tool for guiding your instruction on behavioral expectations. In completing the matrix, you have outlined the lessons that you need to teach. It is important, when systematically teaching expectations to students that we teach what each expectation looks like in each setting. Essentially, each cell in the matrix you developed represents one lesson plan for teaching appropriate expectations. The remaining sections of this paper will focus on how to systematically teach expectations to young children.

### **Teaching Expectations**

When teaching expectations to young children, it is highly beneficial to teach the expectations in the actual settings where you expect children to display them. For example, when you teach children what it looks like to *Take Care of Ourselves* on the playground, go to the playground to teach, practice, and reinforce the setting-specific rules. Behavioral expectations should be taught like any other skill we teach young children. Consider how you teach young children to recognize colors. First, you tell and show them what the color looks like. Next, you give them opportunities to practice identifying the color. Finally, you check to see if they are

recognizing the color within typical daily environments and you acknowledge them for getting it right. The same process applies to teaching behavioral expectations. In the following sections, we will outline a four-step process for teaching behavioral expectations:

- (1) **Tell** children what the expectation is, what it looks like and why it is important.
- (2) **Show** children what it looks like to display the expectation in the target setting or routine and what it looks like to not meet the expectation.
- (3) Create opportunities for children to **practice** implementing the expectation in the target setting or routine.
- (4) Provide **feedback** to children for both meeting the expectation and not meeting the expectation in natural contexts.

The lesson plan Ms. Teresa developed for teaching *We Take Care of Our Friends in Circle Time* is included in Figure 2.

### **Step 1: Tell**

The first step in teaching behavioral expectations to young children focuses on clearly defining the behavior and what it looks like in the target setting or routine. After all, we can't teach how to behave if we can't describe it! A lot of the work for this step has already been done by developing a behavioral expectation matrix. In each cell of the matrix, you have already outlined the specific behaviors that encompass the expectation in each setting or routine. The first part of this step is to explain those specific behaviors to children. The next part of this step is to provide a rationale for why following this expectation in this setting or routine is important. This should be relatively easy to do. Consider this . . . if it is difficult to identify a rationale for a specific expectation, then perhaps that expectation isn't as important as we thought.

In the lesson that Ms. Teresa developed, she first outlined what it means to *Take Care of Our Friends in Circle Time*: (a) Keep hands, feet and other objects to self; (b) Take turns; (c) Listen when others are talking; and (d) Use inside voices. Ms. Teresa explained to students that it is important to know how to interact appropriately with our peers so that our classroom can be a positive environment where everyone can feel safe and learn. This is also a time when you could talk with children about how they feel when someone takes turns with them or listens to them as opposed to when they do not.

### **Step 2: Show**

The second step in teaching behavioral expectations to young children focuses on showing children what the expectation looks like (example) as well as showing them what it does not look like (non-example). This can be done in a variety of ways, including discussing what it does and does not look like or having the teacher and other adults act out or demonstrate (model) examples and non-examples with puppets.

Consider why it is important to show both what it does look like as well as what it does not look like. This is often easiest understood by considering the types of misbehaviors we see from young children. Using inside voices can be a simple example for this. We can demonstrate what it looks like to use an inside voice, speaking in a whisper or a very soft tone and children might understand from that example that yelling is not appropriate behavior. However, it may be less clear how their speaking voice, while talking to a friend across the circle is different from what you demonstrated. Showing children what using an inside voice does not look like allows you as the teacher to demonstrate where the line is between an inside voice and an outside voice. It is often helpful, when planning your negative teaching examples, to think about the ways in which children break this rule (perhaps even unknowingly). Knowing that children often talk,

without yelling, to peers across the circle indicates that this would be a good non-example to include. It will help to clarify to them, that they should not talk with people who are more than a few feet away if they want to use an inside voice.

Ms. Teresa outlined several positive and negative teaching examples for what it looks like to *Take Care of Our Friends in Circle Time*. Notice how examples are included for each of the specific examples of that expectation in that routine (e.g., taking turns, listening, using inside voices and keeping hands, feet, and other objects to ourselves). The questions provided in italics after the examples and non-examples can facilitate further discussion that can be particularly helpful when reviewing the non-examples.

### **Step 3: Practice**

When we teach new cognitive skills to young children, we know that we need to allow them an opportunity to practice. The same is true for teaching behavioral skills or expectations. Many teachers often find this part of the lesson plan to be the most fun and the place where they get to be the most creative. There is no limit to the types of activities that you can do to allow children an opportunity to practice new behavioral skills. The message is just to give them an opportunity to practice before you expect them to perform the skills independently and across settings.

Many teachers use a variety of materials such as books, puppets, songs, and games to provide practice opportunities for young children. Ms. Teresa identified two practice opportunities for children in her classroom. First, she showed the children various pictures that she made using clipart of children displaying appropriate and inappropriate examples of the rules. She showed the pictures to the children one at a time. For each picture, she asked the class to put their thumbs up if the children in the picture were meeting the expectations and put their

thumbs down if the children in the picture were not meeting the expectations. For example, when she showed them a picture of a child singing while the teacher was talking, children put their thumbs down because the child was not listening when others were taking. What is wonderful about this activity is that after the lesson, Ms. Teresa placed a full set of the pictures in the free choice area so that children could practice sorting them. She also placed copies of the positive examples on the wall near the circle area as reminders of the expectations, both for the children and for herself and the other adults. Remember how Ms. Teresa was concerned about getting her teaching assistant and other adults on the same page with her? These posters were an excellent reminder to both use the common language of the classroom and to catch students being good.

The second practice activity that Ms. Teresa developed in this case allowed children an opportunity to act out what meeting the expectations looks like. Ms. Teresa put slips of paper in a hat with the name of each of the four specific rules that showed *Taking Care of Our Friends in Circle Time*. She then picked out a rule and drew the name of a student. Whichever student's name was drawn was asked to show the class (act out) what it looks like to follow that rule. Each rule was demonstrated multiple times so that each child would have a chance to participate. The children really enjoyed acting out the rules and it allowed the class to discuss different examples. For example, while one child demonstrated taking turns by allowing another child to pick a circle time song to sing first, another child demonstrated taking turns by allowing another child to sit on their favorite circle time spot.

#### **Step 4: Feedback**

The last step in teaching behavioral expectations focuses on providing feedback to children after the expectation has been taught. Feedback does not just refer to letting students know when they are behaving either appropriately or inappropriately. It also includes

anticipating behavior problems and reminding students of the expectations before problem behavior occurs.

Ms. Teresa outlined strategies for (a) anticipating behavior problems and prompting children to use desired behaviors, (b) reminding children quickly and efficiently when challenging behavior did occur, and (c) acknowledging children who were meeting the expectation. Her goal was to prompt and remind children to use the appropriate skills and then catch them being good. To anticipate behavior problems and prompt children to use desired behaviors, Ms. Teresa decided to hang visual examples of the expectations near the circle area. Since she had children draw examples in the practice activity, she was able to use their own drawings. She also made sure to prompt children about the expectation before they went to the circle area. Typically she did this by asking the children to remind her what the expectations were for circle.

Ms. Teresa was also able to use the children's posters to re-direct them to the expectations when challenging behavior occurred. Having the visual allowed her to do this quickly and efficiently without necessarily having to interrupt the flow of her circle time activities. Finally, she made sure to acknowledge those children who were meeting the expectations by providing them with specific verbal feedback. For example, she would say "Thank you Jeremiah for letting Zoey pick a song first. Your turn will be next." Each time she acknowledged children, she made sure that they knew exactly why they were being acknowledged. In the days and weeks immediately following teaching this skill, Ms. Teresa made sure to provide a lot of acknowledgement to help children understand that they were getting it. Over time, this acknowledgement faded so that it was much more infrequent once they had obtained the skill.

Ms. Teresa did notice, however, that she needed to occasionally revisit or re-teach the expectations throughout the year. In particular, when students had been out of the classroom for an extended amount of time (e.g., holiday break), she made sure to review and revisit the expectations when they returned to school. Since she had already developed all of the materials and the children were familiar with the language, this was relatively easy to do.

### **Conclusion**

We cannot expect children to meet expectations in early childhood classrooms if we do not teach them directly and systematically. In this article, we have outlined a process for defining and teaching behavioral expectations to young children. This can be done at an individual classroom level or at a program-wide level (see for example Fox & Hemmeter, 2009; Stormont, Lewis & Beckner, 2005). In many ways, it is beneficial to develop program-wide expectations and lesson plans for teaching that can be used across classrooms. Program-wide implementation helps with consistency as well as helping to spread the workload. Imagine creating a lesson plan for each cell of a behavior matrix individually versus splitting the load across teachers in your program. Either way, the important message is that children thrive in effective environments that are consistent, predictable, positive and safe. Defining and teaching behavioral expectations is a primary and foundational component of this.

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Figure 1. Behavior Teaching Matrix

<b>Settings/ Routines</b>	<b>Rules/Expectations</b>		
	We take care of Ourselves	We take care of our Friends	We take care of our School
Circle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eyes on the teacher.</li> <li>• Listen to the teacher.</li> <li>• Sit in your spot.</li> <li>• Sit crisscross applesauce.</li> <li>• Ask questions when you do not understand.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep hands, feet, and other objects to self.</li> <li>• Take turns.</li> <li>• Listen when others are talking.</li> <li>• Use inside voices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treat all equipment and books gently.</li> <li>• Help clean up.</li> </ul>
Bathroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wash your hands.</li> <li>• Use walking feet.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep hands, feet, and other objects to self.</li> <li>• Take turns.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flush the toilet.</li> <li>• Keep water in the sink.</li> <li>• Turn off the water.</li> <li>• Put paper towels in the trash.</li> </ul>
Outside	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen to the teacher.</li> <li>• Use walking feet on the pavement.</li> <li>• Slide on your bottom.</li> <li>• Line up when called.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep hands, feet, and other objects to self.</li> <li>• Take turns using the equipment.</li> <li>• Use kind words.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put away toys and equipment.</li> <li>• Pick up all garbage left on the playground.</li> <li>• Treat all equipment gently.</li> </ul>
Mealtime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen to the teacher.</li> <li>• Sit square in your chair facing the table.</li> <li>• Ask to be dismissed when you are done.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep hands, feet, and other objects to self.</li> <li>• Listen when others are talking.</li> <li>• Wait for your turn.</li> <li>• Use inside voices.</li> <li>• Say “please” and “thank you”.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clean up you area.</li> <li>• Tell a teacher if you made a spill or see a spill.</li> </ul>
Pick-up/Bus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen to the bus driver or crossing guard.</li> <li>• Wear your seatbelt.</li> <li>• Wait on the sidewalk for your bus or family.</li> <li>• Sit square in your seat.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep hands, feet, and other objects to self.</li> <li>• Use inside voices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leave all food and drinks in your backpack.</li> <li>• Remember to get all of your things off the bus.</li> </ul>

Figure 2. Behavior Lesson Plan: We Take Care of Our Friends in Circle

<i>Lesson for Teaching Expected Behavior</i>	
<b>Step 1: Tell</b> <i>Identify the expected behavior &amp; provide a rationale for teaching the rule</i>	
<b>We Take Care of Our Friends in Circle:</b> (a) Keep hands, feet, and other objects to self; (b) Take turns; (c) Listen when others are talking; and (d) Use inside voices. It is important to know how to interact appropriately with our peers so that our circle time can be a positive environment where everyone can feel safe and learn.	
<b>Step 2: Show</b> <i>Identify a Range of Examples</i>	
<i>Positive Teaching Examples</i>	<i>Negative Teaching Examples</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. You sit crisscross applesauce on your carpet square so your friends have room. (<i>Why does everyone need space?</i>)</li> <li>2. When the teacher asks someone to pick a song, you raise your hand and wait until the teacher calls on you, even if she calls on someone else first. (<i>Why is it important for everyone to get a turn?</i>)</li> <li>3. When the teacher is talking, you listen quietly so your friends can hear too. (<i>Why would everyone need to hear?</i>)</li> <li>4. You use your inside voice to request a song. (<i>What is the difference between an inside voice and an outside voice?</i>)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A friend is sitting next to you and you poke him with your finger. (<i>How else could you have gotten their attention?</i>)</li> <li>2. You reach over and take a musical instrument away from your friend. (<i>What could you have done if you wanted the instrument instead of just taking it?</i>)</li> <li>3. When another student is talking, you talk to your friend sitting next to you. (<i>When should you talk to your friends?</i>)</li> <li>4. You call out to a friend who is sitting across the circle from you to say hello. (<i>What would be a better way to say "hi" from across the room?</i>)</li> </ol>
<b>Step 3: Practice</b> <i>Practice/Role Playing Activities</i>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide pictures (or drawings) of children displaying appropriate and inappropriate examples of the rules. Show children the pictures one at a time. As a class, ask them to put their thumbs up if the children are meeting the expectations and put their thumbs down if they are not. These pictures can then be included in the free choice area for children to sort.</li> <li>2. Randomly draw specific examples of taking care of our friends in circle time (rules) from a hat. Have individual children demonstrate (act out) what meeting that expectation looks like.</li> </ol>	
<b>Step 4: Feedback</b> <i>Anticipate, Remind &amp; Acknowledge</i>	
<p><i>Anticipate</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hang visual examples of the expectations near circle, using the posters the children made.</li> <li>• Prompt students of the expectations before you begin circle.</li> </ul> <p><i>Remind</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signal the students by pointing at the posters and reminding them of what they are supposed to be doing when they start getting off task and exhibiting problem behaviors.</li> </ul> <p><i>Acknowledge</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Praise your students for taking care of their friends in circle time.</li> </ul>	