



THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY INTERVENTION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN WHO ENGAGE IN CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

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Those children who are labeled as engaging in severe challenging behaviors often find themselves subsequently labeled as the “most troubling” children by both primary caregivers and service providers^{1,2}. For no other group of young children is the trajectory so certain and so dismal as it is for children with challenging behaviors who do not receive effective services^{2,3,4}. Challenging behaviors have been defined by Smith and Fox⁵ as “any repeated pattern of behavior, or perception of behavior, that interferes with or is at risk of interfering with optimal learning or engagement in prosocial interaction with peers and adults” (p. 5).

WHY ARE CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS SO PROBLEMATIC?

Challenging behaviors in early childhood often lead to persistent problems. Engaging in challenging behaviors is associated with future problems with socialization, school adjustment and success, and adaptation to educational settings^{2,6,7,8}. The consequences of challenging behaviors are grave. Research has identified that untreated challenging behaviors in early childhood are associated with:

- a. Delinquency in adolescence,
- b. School dropout,
- c. Adult incarceration,
- d. Gang membership,
- e. Early death,
- f. School failure,
- g. Continued mental health problems and,
- h. Drug and alcohol abuse^{8,9,10,11,12}.

Sadly, challenging behaviors become chronic if those behaviors are not changed by third grade⁷. If left untreated in early childhood, the result is the need for more costly intervention and treatments because the behaviors become more severe and more persistent over time^{7,8}. The results of untreated challenging behaviors are an increased likelihood of removal from inclusive settings and subsequent placement in restrictive settings^{13,14}. *It has been found that 48% of kindergarteners exhibiting challenging behaviors end up in special education by the fourth grade^{15,16}.*

DISABILITY AND CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS.

Challenging behaviors can be seen in 10 to 30% of children^{1,15,17,18,19}. However, this prevalence rate significantly increases for children with disabilities. “Children with disabilities have more than three times the number of serious misconduct incidents per 1000 children than do typically developing children”^{15 (p.1),20}. For example, some children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) demonstrate aggression at rates that are stable and 90% higher than their peers²¹. Furthermore, these challenging behaviors are more likely to follow the child into school age. Fifty percent or more of young children identified with disruptive disorders as toddlers and preschoolers have been found to exhibit challenging behaviors into school years^{22,23}. Seven to 25% of preschool age children already meet criteria for a diagnosis of oppositional defiant disorders²³.

Research has shown that having a disability and exhibiting challenging behaviors results in:

- a. Higher school suspension and expulsion rates²⁴,
- b. Higher dropout rates (e.g., 65% of children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders dropout of school)²⁴ and,
- c. Higher incidence of language deficits²⁵.

Furthermore, Wagner and colleagues^{2,26} conducted a follow-up (i.e., post high school) of students who had received special education services based on the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2. It was found that:

- a. Children with severe behavior disorders had the lowest grade point average when compared to children with other disabilities.
- b. 50% of children with severe behavior disorders failed one of more courses in high school.
- c. Only one third of the participants completed high school, with children with severe behavior disorders having the highest dropout rate.

INTERVENTION MUST BE EARLY AND EFFECTIVE.

As noted above, if children with challenging behaviors do not receive intervention early, their developmental outcomes are dismal. Therefore, early identification and services are essential. In addition to being early, services must be effective. *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* call for “scientifically based research” or “evidence based practices” to be used to guide practice. Furthermore, Part C and B/619 of IDEA include two child outcomes for young children related to social, emotional, and behavioral development. These child outcomes include positive social and emotional skills and use of appropriate behaviors to meet needs¹⁵.

Federally funded projects have been established that are dedicated to developing and disseminating evidence based practices on prevention and intervention for social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties in young children². Intervention was defined by Dunlap and colleagues² as “procedures that caregivers can use to reduce the challenging behaviors of individual young children” (p. 36).

Dunlap and colleague’s review of research on intervention for young children found²:

- a. For an intervention to be effective it must be based on a functional behavior analysis, which determines the communicative intent of the challenging behavior.**
- b. Teaching children alternative replacement behaviors has been well researched and has been shown to be effective in reducing challenging behaviors.**
- c. Antecedent based interventions (i.e., interventions aimed at changing the child’s social and physical environments) decrease the occurrence of challenging behaviors and increase the occurrence of appropriate behaviors.**
- d. Generalizability of skills can be achieved by “multicomponent interventions (i.e., interventions that use antecedent based interventions, choice, and consequences)” that occur in multiple settings (p. 39).**
- e. Increasing family involvement in planning and implementation reduces challenging behaviors².**

These findings are especially important because high quality early childhood programs, which integrate

effective prevention, promotion, and intervention give young children a better chance of future academic success²⁷. However, not all young children attend high quality early childhood programs. Those who need high quality programs (e.g., children at-risk of challenging behaviors and/or disabilities) are the least likely to attend and most likely to be expelled due to behavioral concerns^{28, 29}.

COST EFFECTIVENESS OF EARLY INTERVENTION AND HIGH QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS.

Early intervention for young children is a cost effective way to reduce the consequences and to change the costly trajectory of challenging behaviors. The developmental and behavioral costs associated with challenging behaviors include:

- Peer rejection^{30, 31},
- Frequent failure experiences²⁰,
- Unpleasant interactions with family members and teachers^{32, 33, 34},
- Predictable and consistent school failure^{35, 36} and,
- Lack of community integration^{37, 38, 39}.

Furthermore, it has been shown that the monetary costs of challenging behaviors, specifically aggressive behaviors include:

- “One billion dollars spent annually to incarcerate youth⁴⁰ and,
- 500 billion spent annually to repair and replace property destroyed by youth^{41, 42} (p.298).

Effective intervention can reduce these kinds of costs and create better outcomes for children engaging in challenging behaviors and their families and can reduce the monetary costs associated with persistence of challenging behaviors.

More specifically, costs to benefit analyses have been conducted on high quality intervention programs (e.g., Abecedarian project, High/Scope Perry Preschool program, Chicago Parent Center Program, Regional Intervention Program) for young children (i.e., 3-5 year olds). It has been found that overall program benefits exceed the costs associated. Specifically, it has been found that evidence based interventions^{42, 43, 44}:

- a. Increase rates of high school completion,
- b. Decrease rates of juvenile arrest,
- c. Reduce arrests due to violent crimes,
- d. Reduce special education placements,

- e. Decrease grade retention,
- f. Reduce abuse and maltreatment,
- g. Increase higher education attainment, which equals higher earning capacity, and
- h. Reduce long term monetary costs to society, government, and the general public.

Furthermore, the Regional Intervention Program (RIP) was examined to identify the long-term effects of behavioral skill training for parents of young children engaging in severe challenging behaviors⁴². RIP serves families with young children for “whom serious concerns (e.g., antisocial behavior) exist regarding behaviors and/or development”^{42 (p.298)}. Family members were taught to address specific concerns about their child’s problematic behaviors and social skills in a variety of settings using behavioral skill training. Specifically, it was found that:

- a. **The outcomes of this program (e.g., reduction of problematic behaviors, improved social skills) were maintained for periods ranging from 3 to 9 years.**
- b. **Children who began the program earlier experienced more favorable and long-term outcomes.**
- c. **In the 25 year follow-up, RIP clients were well-adjusted, competent, and happy adults.**
- d. **Families felt better able to deal with problematic behaviors.**⁴²

POLICY IMPLICATIONS.

The cost to benefit analyses suggest that **future policy should focus on funding high quality early childhood programs that promote appropriate behavior and prevent or reduce challenging behaviors.** Future policy should also:

- a. Promote economically feasible best practices for challenging behaviors that can be included in high quality early childhood programs⁴⁵.
- b. Provide training to professionals to identify and serve children with challenging behaviors to reduce expulsion rates.
- c. Provide training to professionals (e.g., coaches, trainers, teachers) to use best practices to improve outcomes and access for children engaging in challenging behaviors.
- d. Provide resources for more concrete cost to benefit analysis on challenging behaviors⁴⁵.
- e. Increase access to high quality early childhood programs for all children.

The benefits of funding high quality early childhood programs would save the government future expenses on special education services, welfare services, and justice systems. Federal, state, and local programs will require greater leadership, funding and access to evidence based practices.

ENDNOTES

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WEBSITES

<http://www.pyramidplus.org/>

<http://www.challengingbehavior.org/>

<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>

<http://www.pbis.org/>

Policy Brief available from *Pyramid Plus*:
The Colorado Center for Social Emotional Competence and Inclusion: <http://www.pyramidplus.org>