

## Using Compassion, Connection, and Co-Regulation to Address Challenging Behaviors in Young Children



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1

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2

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3

## Disclosures

**Nonfinancial Disclosure:** Cari has an Autistic son and shares personal experiences in her trainings.

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4

## Learning Outcomes

As a result of this training, participants will be able to:

1. Explain the importance of reframing challenging behavior as dysregulation.
2. Describe how traditional behavior modification approaches that rely on the use of reinforcers can be co-escalating rather than co-regulating.
3. Summarize the importance of using the 4 Cs (curiosity, compassion, connection, and coregulation) to address challenging behavior in young children.

5

Let's Talk About Behavior  
in Young Children

6

# What is Behavior?

Mona Delahooke, 2017

“Behavior is the observable response to our internal and external experiences.”



7

## Behavior is Communication

Behavior is often the only accessible form of communication a child has during times of distress!



Saying “*Use your words*” when a child is dysregulated isn’t helpful. Their behavior is being used in place of words!

8

## Challenging Behaviors

- Challenging behaviors in young children weaken communication with peers, decrease the quality of the educational process, and reduce the job satisfaction of educators (Aksoy, 2020).
- Challenging behaviors can be externalized or internalized:
  - Externalizing behaviors are outwardly expressed
  - Internalizing behaviors are inwardly expressed

9



### Externalizing Behavior

(take it out on others;  
more common in males)

### Internalizing Behavior

(take it out on self; more  
common in females)

Schlack & Petermann, 2013



10

## Common Externalizing Behaviors in Young Children

- Having outbursts that can't be controlled
- Refusing or ignoring requests
- Excessive running, jumping, crying, screaming
- Verbal or physical aggression
- Behaving in unsafe ways
- Eloping/running off



11

## Assessing Challenging Behavior

12

When a challenging behavior arises, instead of trying to immediately stop it, **we must first seek to understand it**



13

Challenging behavior usually occurs because of either an **unmet need** or a **missing skill**

- 1. Unmet Need:**  
Physical, Sensory,  
Emotional
- 1. Missing Skill:**  
Cognitive, Motor,  
Communication,  
Social, Executive  
Function



14

# Developmental Iceberg

(Mona Delahooke, 2017)



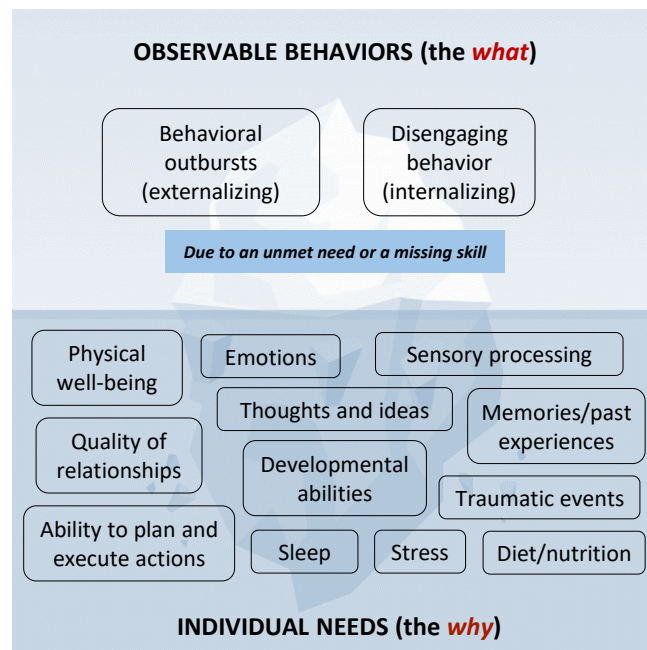
We should seek to understand behaviors using a holistic brain-body model (iceberg analogy).

1. Behavioral challenges are the observable, measurable behaviors that tell us **what** is happening (the visible part of the iceberg above the surface of the water).
2. Invisible, individual needs are the less obvious factors that are concealed from view but can help us understand **why** the behavior is happening (the larger part of the iceberg below the surface of the water).

15

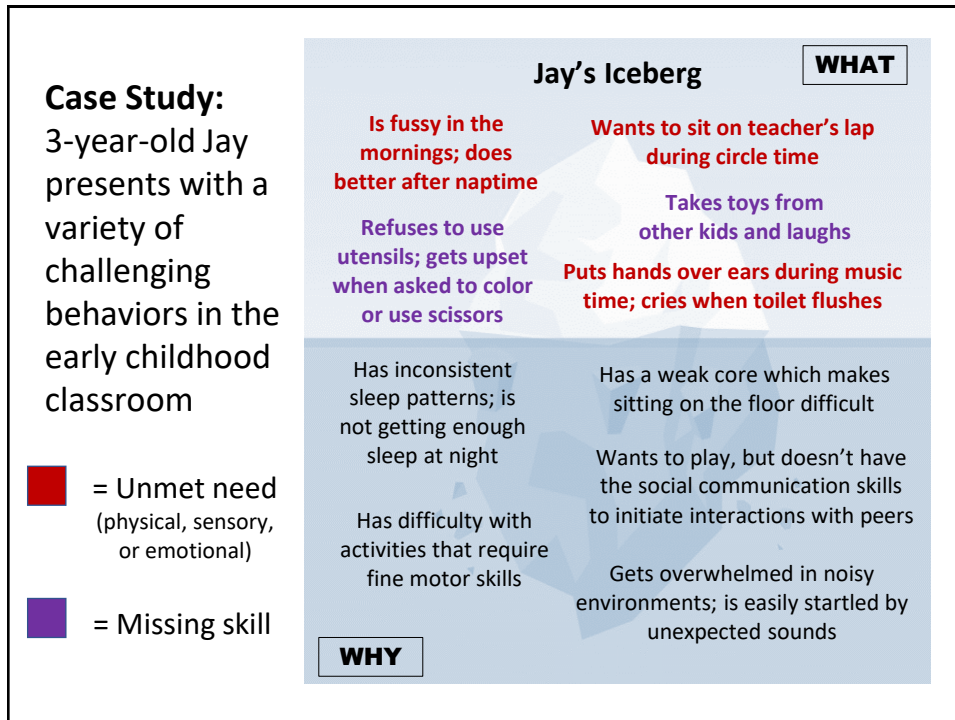
## Developmental Iceberg

Adapted from Mona Delahooke, 2017



16





17

## Discipline: Addressing Challenging Behavior

Using brain science to understand why punishments and rewards are often ineffective

18

# Discipline

(Siegel & Bryson, 2014, The Whole Brain Child)

- Discipline is our response to the challenging behavior. **Most adults think that discipline means to punish.**
- Discipline comes from the Latin word “disciplina” which means *to instruct*. **Discipline means to teach.**

***A disciple is a student, not a recipient of behavioral consequences.***

19

In the Christian church...



Jesus was teaching his **disciples**

20

Discipline means to teach,  
not to punish

*Discipline*

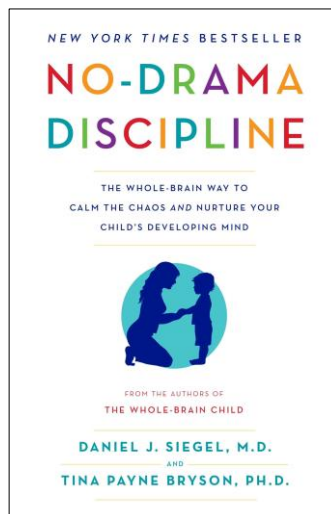


*Punishment*



21

## Recommended Discipline Book



22

## Common Discipline Approach

(Scott & Cogburn, 2021)

- Behavior modification is a commonly used discipline approach used to eliminate or reduce challenging behavior and increase compliance. In our schools, the system is called PBIS.
- Reinforcement and punishment are used to reduce or eliminate the challenging behavior.
- But...little consideration is given to the child's thoughts or feelings (the *why* behind the behavior).

23

## Outdated Way of Thinking About Functions of Behavior

(through a behaviorist lens)

1. **Attention:** Child uses a specific behavior to seek attention.
2. **Escape:** Child uses a specific behavior to avoid an undesirable activity.
3. **Access:** Child uses a specific behavior to try and access a desired item or activity.
4. **Sensory:** Child's behavior is satisfying...it feels good.

24

## Old Way of Thinking About the Functions of Behavior (through a behaviorist lens)

1. **Attention:** Child uses a specific behavior to get attention.
2. **Escape/Avoidance:** Child uses a specific behavior to escape or avoid a situation.
3. **Access to Tangibles:** Child uses a specific behavior to try and access a desired item or activity.
4. **Sensory:** Child's behavior is satisfying...it feels good.

**\*\*Problem with this surface-level analysis:**

3. It assumes the child is in control of their

25

## Shifting Away from Power and Control

The primary goal of “behavior management” is to reduce or eliminate the problem behavior and replace it with something deemed more acceptable. But the **root cause of the behavior** itself is not being addressed.

Instead of trying to “manage” a child’s behavior (choosing power and control), we are going to become detectives and 1) **seek to understand** the behavior and then 2) **change what we do** to better support the child’s nervous system needs.

26

**“When a flower doesn’t bloom you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.”**

-Alexander Den Heijer



27

**When a child doesn’t thrive, you fix the environment in which they live, learn, and play...not the child.**



28

## Everyone loves a freebie!

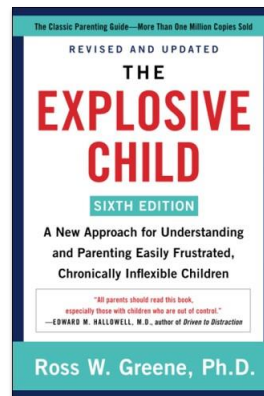


29

## Cari's favorite quotes by child psychologist, Dr. Ross Greene

*Challenging behavior is how a child tells us that they don't have the skills to handle the demands of the current situation.*

*Kids do well when they can.*



30

## Why Behavior Management Plans Fail

- Behavior plans are often ineffective because they assume that the child is **choosing to misbehave...**that the child has the ability to self-regulate and is simply choosing not to do it.
- We have decided that the child can act better (control their emotions and behavior) if they would just **try harder**.
- So, we **incentivize their behavior** with reinforcers, rewards, and the threat of punishments. And then we get frustrated when their behavior doesn't improve.

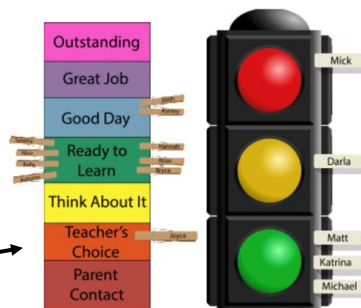
31

## Behavior Modification

(Bear, 1990)

### Components of behavior modification:

- Tally sheets of problem behaviors
- Reinforcement techniques (behavior charts/token economies/clip charts/sticker charts/prizes/awards/popcorn parties, etc.)
- Punishment-oriented techniques (verbal reprimand, time out, threats, removal of reinforcers, loss of privilege)
- Public accountability →



32



## Extrinsic Motivation

- Using an incentive-based approach teaches children to be extrinsically motivated (if you do this thing or act a certain way, then you get a reward; if you don't, you lose a privilege/get punished).
- This behavior modification approach can prevent children from developing intrinsic motivation and the drive to succeed independently.
- This approach may work for some children in the short term, but what about the long term? **We should be teaching the child how to deal with big emotions, not trying to prevent them from having big emotions.**

33

Proponents of the behavior modification approach try to argue that getting a prize is similar to adults getting a paycheck



But this is a poorly thought-out argument

34

## Reward vs. Paycheck

Greg Santucci, Neurodiversity Affirming Occupational Therapist  
Megg Thompson, Neurodiversity Affirming Behavioral Consultant

Working for candy, stickers, toys, tokens, or points is not the same as working for a paycheck...and here's why:

1. We're dealing with different brains; an adult's prefrontal cortex is fully developed, a child's is not
2. A reinforcer/reward is given for a child's compliance; a paycheck is given for an employee's time and expertise



35

3. A child has no choice and cannot change their situation (teacher, choice of discipline, rules, etc.), but an adult can choose a job that matches their abilities, and can quit and change jobs when dissatisfied
4. A paycheck shows mutual consent between adults; use of a reinforcer is a unilateral decision by the person in power that is *not* mutually agreed upon
5. The lack of empathy from an adult can cause a child to lose a reward; the lack of empathy from an employer does not take away a paycheck from an employee

36

Punishment is choosing power, control, and consequences over compassion and connection



*"Where did we ever get the crazy idea that in order to make children do better, first we have to make them feel worse?"* -Jane Nelsen

37

*"Think of the last time you felt humiliated or treated unfairly. Did you feel like cooperating or doing better?"* -Jane Nelsen



38

## Intentional Misbehavior

- Adults often say, *The child is acting that way on purpose* or *They're doing it for attention*.
- Strategic **tantrums**, in which the child uses manipulation and purposeful misbehavior to get their way, can occur but are **less common than stress-induced outbursts** (Dr. Mona Delahooke).
- Most intense reactions are reflexive responses to feeling overwhelmed, not volitional disobedience.

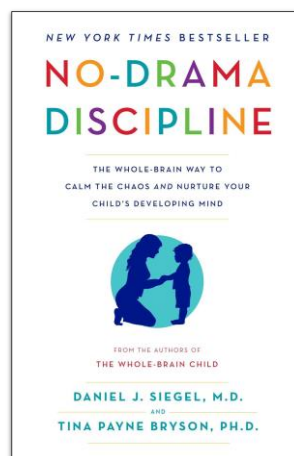
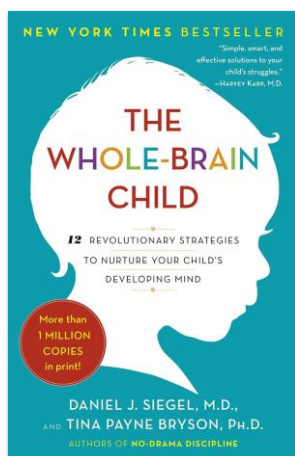
39

## Tantrum vs. Meltdown

- During a strategic tantrum, the child remains communicative and in control of their behavior. The child is trying to manipulate the adult with their behavior.
- During a stress-induced outburst (meltdown), the child has flipped their lid and is no longer in control of their behavior. The child cannot effectively communicate during a meltdown.

40

## Discipline Through a Neuroscience Lens



41



## Upstairs Brain and Downstairs Brain

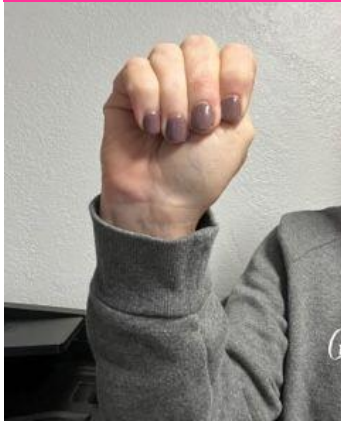
(Siegel & Bryson)

- Downstairs brain (brainstem and limbic system) is responsible for bodily functions, instincts, safety, and strong emotions
- Upstairs brain (cerebral cortex) is responsible for decision making, flexibility, empathy, impulse control, self-regulation (and all other executive functions)

42

## Handy Brain Model

Upstairs brain  
(prefrontal cortex)

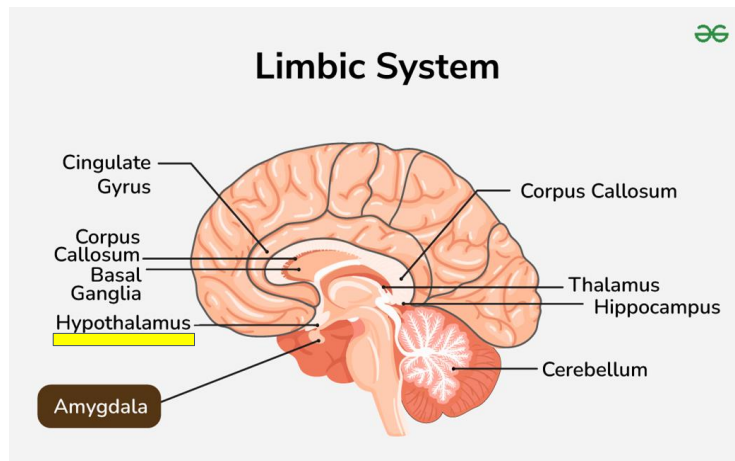


Downstairs brain  
(limbic system)



43

## Neuroscience Lesson: Understanding the Limbic System



44

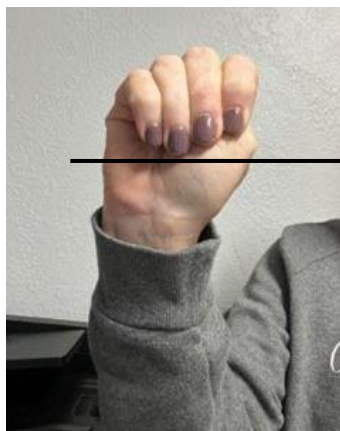
## The Limbic System

- The limbic system is a group of structures in the brain that regulate emotions, behavior, motivation and memory.
- The amygdala, a small, almond-shaped brain structure, is primarily responsible for processing emotions, especially fear and anxiety.
- When the amygdala is hijacked, it sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus which activates the sympathetic nervous system by pumping the stress hormone epinephrine/adrenaline into the bloodstream.

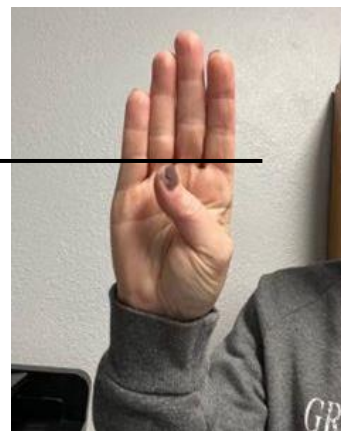


45

### Amygdala Hijack: What happens when someone “flips their lid”



*regulated; in a ready  
state for learning*



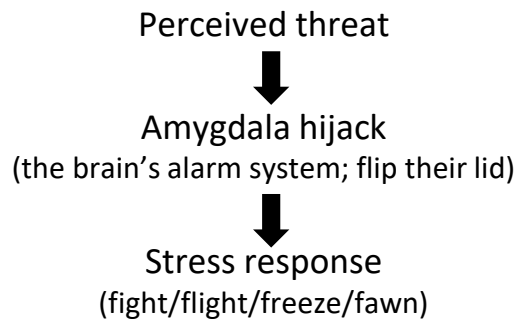
*dysregulated;  
flipped their lid*

46

## When the child “flips their lid”

(Siegel & Bryson)

- Upstairs brain goes off; downstairs brain is activated
- We cannot reason with a child whose downstairs brain is in charge



*The amygdala is designed to win the battle of the wills; threats and demands will increase this desire*

47

1. Young child flips his lid and hits peer who took toy away.
2. Adult yells at the child and puts him in time-out.
3. The discipline approach exacerbates the situation.
4. The child does not learn anything about how to deal with big emotions from this interaction.

Our response  
to a child’s  
behavior matters



48



## When the Discipline Approach Exacerbates the Behavior

- When the adult puts the child in time-out, over-reacts by yelling, talks too much, focuses on the observable behavior (the what) instead of the cause (the why), and has unrealistic expectations...their decision to use power and control often leads to intense reactions from the child.
- When a child feels threatened, overwhelmed, or helpless, their amygdala is hijacked and the child's nervous system exhibits a **stress response**.

49

## 4 Stress Responses

(WholeHearted School Counseling, Psychology Today)

**Fight:** Verbal or physical aggression; irritable, angry, offended, defensive, demanding, controlling, defiant, oppositional, non-compliant

**Flight:** Running/bolting/elopeing from the situation; anxious, scared, panicked, worried, overwhelmed

**Freeze:** Shutting down; incapable of moving or making a choice; verbally unresponsive

**Fawn:** Trying to please a person of authority to avoid conflict; saying what they think others want to hear; masking/ignoring own needs to keep everyone else happy

50



Our response to challenging behavior should be to calm the situation rather than create more chaos (Siegel & Bryson, 2014).

51

## A Better Way

Yelling, time-out, fear of losing a privilege...these consequences may work temporarily, but we are teaching the child that having big emotions is unacceptable.



There is a better way to discipline...and it's based on the 4 Cs: **curiosity, connection, compassion, and co-regulation.**

52

**We have a choice to make: When a child reacts with a challenging behavior we can either choose...**

Co-regulation strategies that help calm the situation

*or*

Co-escalation strategies that create more chaos

53

*Co-regulation  
in action*



Discipline

*Co-escalation  
in action*



Punishment

54

## Self-Regulation and Co-Regulation

- Self-regulation refers to a person's ability to control the way they feel and behave (Mahler, 2017). Self-regulation requires a flexible, fluid nervous system that can quickly adapt to changes in demands.
- Young children have a limited capacity to self-regulate, so they rely on caregivers for co-regulation.
- During co-regulation, the adult acts like a thermostat and models a regulated state.
- If the adult allows the child to be the thermostat, the result is co-escalation instead of co-regulation.



55

When a challenging behavior/dysregulation occurs, the first step is to get **curious** about the WHY behind the behavior (unmet need or missing skill?)



Then we move to **compassion, connection, and co-regulation** to help the child's nervous system reset and become receptive instead of reactive

56

## Compassion and Connection

- When a challenging behavior occurs, instead of reacting with power and control, we must **pause and recognize that the child is not able to regulate their emotions or control their behavior in this moment.**
- Use compassion and connection, instead of reinforcers and punishment, to support the child:
  - ✓ Give them attention so they feel seen
  - ✓ Listen so they feel heard
  - ✓ Be respectful and compassionate
  - ✓ Remain calm
  - ✓ Convey that you are on their side, whether you approve of their behavior or not

57

## Regulation before Rationalization

(Siegel & Bryson, 2014)

- You cannot rationalize with or redirect an emotionally charged child...just like you cannot teach a fighting dog to sit.
- We use connection to guide the child's nervous system from being reactive to receptive.
- We use co-regulation to help the child learn *how* to build internal regulation skills.
- Once the child is regulated and in a receptive state, we can teach new skills for dealing with big feelings in the future (support development of self-regulation).



58

## Discipline: Order of Events

When the child is dysregulated and a challenging behavior is exhibited by the child, adults should...

1. Remain calm and focus on co-regulation (activate those mirror neurons)

*Be the  
thermostat!*



59

2. Convey compassion by comforting the child to defuse escalated emotions
3. Get curious about the *why* behind the behavior
4. Connect with the child to validate their experience, make sure they feel seen and heard
5. Identify and label the emotion to build the child's emotional vocabulary
6. Once the child feels safe, connected, calm, and social (i.e., once their upstairs brain is activated) teach them how to work through big emotions and difficult experiences like this in the future

*It's okay to be **mad**...it's not okay to hit*

60

## Planned Ignoring

- What about planned ignoring?
- An outburst is a plea for help, and we shouldn't ignore pleas for help.
- We need to pay attention to behaviors instead of ignoring them. We need to seek to understand the behavior (get curious!). A certain behavior, such as rocking back and forth or clenched fists, may be a signal that the child is getting overwhelmed. If we can provide support now, we can prevent the child from flipping their lid and having an outburst that sends the child into full meltdown mode.

61

## Co-Escalation

If we try to ignore, punish, or manipulate the child...we will likely escalate their stress level and amplify the behavior (because we have activated their downstairs brain).

Looking at behavior through a neuroscience lens instead of through a behavioral lens is key!

We don't need to manage behavior, we need to seek to understand the *why* behind the behavior.

62

## What Children Need *During* Moments of Distress

- Therapeutic use of self by the adult (absence of threat in the adult's tone of voice, relaxed posture, body positioned below child's eye level, calm and comforting voice/no yelling; soft eyes)



63

## What Children Need *During* Moments of Distress (cont'd)

- To feel seen, heard, loved, understood, and accepted
- Less talking; quiet presence and support
- Respectful adults who will honor the child's communication and need for physical space
- Adults who can stay regulated even when the child is out of control (this is perhaps the most challenging thing to do!)
- Adults who don't tell the child *what* to feel (*You shouldn't be so sad/mad/upset*), but who help them recognize the big emotion and deal with it in an appropriate manner when the time is right

64



## What Children Need *Before* Moments of Distress Occur

- Adults with predictable behaviors who provide consistent boundaries and have high expectations
- Flexible and responsive caregivers who create structure with compassion and respect
- Adults who use a consistent, positive, relationship-based interaction style (authoritative)

65

## 3 Types of Early Childhood Classrooms

1. Authoritarian classroom (compliance-based)
2. Permissive/Indulgent classrooms (wild west)
3. Authoritative classroom (relationship-based)

66

## **Authoritarian Early Childhood Classrooms**

- Highly structured learning environment with strict rules
- Primary focus is on compliance
- Rigid schedule without flexibility
- Young learners are expected to sit still and be quiet until they are given permission to play
- Children work for reinforcers (use of sticker charts, clip charts, and other extrinsic reward systems)
- Low intrinsic motivation; children are just complying with tasks to earn reinforcers/avoid punishment

67

- Children have limited opportunities to make choices or share their thoughts and opinions
- All kids are expected to learn in the same way at the same time; one set of expectations for all; limited acceptance or understanding of brain differences
- Teacher does not communicate with children in a respectful way; frequently yells or snaps at them
- Teacher chooses power and control over compassion, connection, and co-regulation
- Challenging behavior is addressed with punitive discipline (time out, removal of recess, loss of privileges, threatening to call parents)

68

## **Permissive or Indulgent Early Childhood Classrooms**

- Few or inconsistent rules or expectations for behavior
- Lack of structure, chaotic, noisy
- Teacher has little control over the learning environment
- Kids have a lot of freedom to do what they want
- Often leads to an unproductive learning environment
- Permissive = teacher has low involvement with kids  
Indulgent = teacher has good rapport with kids (but too friendly)
- Challenging behavior is not effectively addressed

69

## **Authoritative Early Childhood Classrooms**

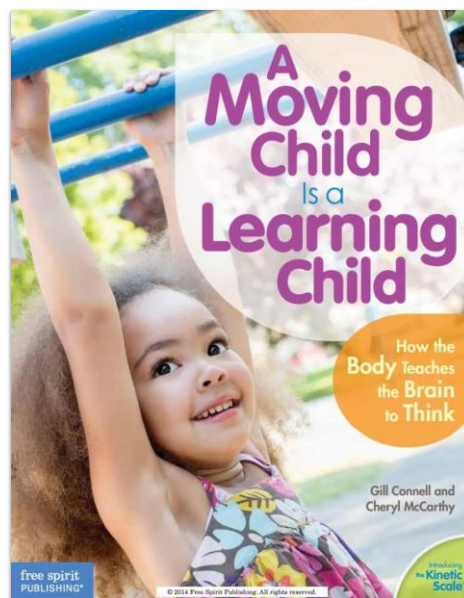
- Teacher creates a nurturing and caring environment where children feel valued and respected
- Teacher provides clear rules and predictable routines so kids know what is expected of them, but remains flexible and accommodating
- Teacher is responsive to the fluctuating needs of the kids throughout the day
- Inclusive, accepting, and welcoming environment is provided so *all* children feel like they belong
- Engaging learning materials are provided to enhance participation and comprehension

70

- Teacher communicates with kids in a respectful and understanding manner, building strong relationships and fostering trust
- A positive learning environment is provided that promotes autonomy and responsibility; kids are allowed to make choices and take ownership of their own learning
- Teachers recognize and support the differences in how children learn and interact with the world
- Play-based learning is recognized as developmentally appropriate practice; play-based movement and learning through discovery and exploration are encouraged

71

**Highly recommended  
book for early  
childhood providers**



72

- Supportive learning environment where regulation and connection are prioritized over compliance
- The teacher uses the 4 Cs (curiosity, compassion, connection, co-regulation) to address challenging behavior (instead of reinforcers and punishment)



73

## Time to Wrap Up

**Behavior is a reflection of what is happening in the nervous system!** When a child presents with a challenging behavior, stop assuming this is a display of willful disobedience.

Seek to understand the *why* behind the behavior, not just extinguish it. Focus on the 4 Cs (curiosity, compassion, connection, and co-regulation).



74

Thank you for joining me  
today!

*Cari*

75

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