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# ~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

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## MANAGING "DIFFICULT" PARTICIPANT BEHAVIOR

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Participants who are difficult to please, difficult to manage, and simply difficult to be around are a reality in the trainer's world. ~ Paula Jorde Bloom

### INTRODUCTION

Early childhood trainers ultimately bear responsibility for establishing and maintaining a positive learning environment during training events. Most trainers make every attempt to provide an experience where participants can focus on the topic, engage safely in the learning process, and subsequently learn and grow. Most trainers as well have experience with behaviors that are likely to confuse and distract participants from the learning process.

Have you ever felt frustrated or unsure about how to deal with individuals who act less-than-enthusiastic during a training event? Have you ever wondered about the best way to deal with someone who engages in more serious and ultimately disruptive behavior? Certain types of conduct can be challenging at best and disruptive at worst. Occasionally, "difficult" behavior can interrupt the learning process so much that the trainer and other participants end up visibly annoyed.

There are no easy solutions to trying situations, but there are solutions. Trainers can first think about the environment, themselves, and what they know about participants, and then confidently address touchy situations with strategies that have been used successfully by other experienced trainers.

### THINK FIRST

You might already be aware that you have some influ-

ence over the behavior of participants in a given training session. This is not to say that participants' negative behavior is your fault, but just recognize that you have some responsibility. For one thing, "effective training involves students and professionals in planning and designing the training (NAEYC, 1993)." This single act can have a powerful impact on participants' positive involvement but it is not always feasible.

Being aware of your responsibility, you will want to know strategies both to understand and respond to distressful situations. The first step is to think about the learning environment you have created, yourself and your state of being, and what you know about the participants as individuals as well as group members. The second step is to employ specific strategies when, in spite of your best efforts, participants' negative conduct demands positive guidance.

This approach is not unlike what has been observed with young children in early childhood settings. In many cases, children's behavior is triggered—for better or for worse—by the environment, the teacher, and their own temperament and well-being. While strategies for guiding children's challenging behavior are very helpful, these are things to think about before direct intervention. Using strategies that promote positive learning behavior during training provides a concrete model for teachers and caregivers to practice with young children as well.

## ~ Think About the Learning Environment

Is the space for the training too crowded, too warm, too cold, etc.? Encourage small groups to spread out during activities into other parts of the building or move the group to another space. Sometimes the best you can do is acknowledge the difficulty, go ahead with the session, and promise to make changes next time.

Has the session been too unstructured or too demanding? Have participants been required to sit still and listen for too long? Watch for signs that participants are or are not done with an activity, with listening, or with a break, and move to the next activity accordingly.

Have you provided enough materials (handouts, colored pens, demonstration items, etc.) to satisfy the needs of the group? Quickly gather more materials or change your activity so each participant can be involved in the process. Constantly look for learning activities that engage everyone rather than engaging just a few individuals while others watch.

Do learning activities or materials represent or suggest inappropriate interaction? Asking adults to pretend to be children almost always leads to unfortunate outcomes. Adults can learn best about children by thinking about their own childhood, reflecting on videos of children, or analyzing a child's thinking in a case study. Demonstration materials and table toys also need to be suitable for adults.

## ~ Think About Yourself

Are your expectations for the individuals in this group reasonable? Remind yourself about the developmental stage of each person in the group and adjust your expectations accordingly. Encourage a tangential discussion when it is helpful and appropriate for this group. Direct them back to the topic when it is not.

Has this behavior pushed one of your "buttons"? Perhaps you are a person who feels out of control when the unexpected happens. Maybe you have strong feelings about respecting authority or what constitutes being "rude." You may need to ask yourself why stopping or preventing this particular behavior is so important to you personally. Use what you learn about yourself to decide how to handle it. In certain cases, you may wish to simply acknowledge to the group that

some behaviors really "push your buttons."

How are you feeling? Could a developing cold or hunger be influencing your reactions? Are you less responsive to participants than you usually are? Relax the session agenda, sit down while you present, eat a snack, or drink some water to meet your needs for the moment.

How is your emotional well-being? Family, home, and "on the job" issues can impact how you respond to participants in training just as it affects how participants respond to you. Try to stay in touch with your emotions, take a deep breath, and get through a challenging session as gracefully as possible. If the issue is a recurring one, seek professional support.

Have you been giving inconsistent messages to participants by ignoring this behavior one time and reacting to it the next? Make a clear decision, communicate your expectations—perhaps with a few ground rules—and stick with them.

Has your attention been distracted by your own side conversation with one of the participants or co-trainer or other activities? Turn your focus back to the group. Move closer to participants, make eye contact, and let them know that you are with them again. Save the distracting activities for during the break or after the training. An early setup allows you to welcome participants to the training and start building rapport.

## ~ Think About the Participants

What have you done to discover who these people are and assess their current knowledge of the topic? Making connections with participants in training builds reciprocal relationships and gives you a sense of where they are coming from. It also gives them a sense of who you are and where you are coming from! Avoid making assumptions about participants and start the session with an activity that builds rapport.

Is this typical behavior for this group? Accept the reason for the group's behavior. Restate clear guidelines and move on to the next experience. Plan to set ground rules next time and help the group come up with solutions. If the teachers from that one program are always late, there may be a reasonable explanation.

How is the group's physical well-being? Could they be

tired or hungry? Try to meet perceived physical needs right away—take a break and/or put out snacks.

How is the group's emotional well-being? Is it possible that a busy day, a change in routine, or a staffing change has created stress? Eliminate some planned activities, slow the pace, or return to a familiar activity to enhance feelings of comfort and safety.

Is the temperament or strong need of an individual influencing group reaction? Tune in to the individual. Make quick changes such as giving the person a job like writing on the flip chart or passing out handouts. Switch a group activity to a partner activity to give the person a smaller audience.

## NEGATIVE BEHAVIORS—POSITIVE STRATEGIES

While there are many behaviors that trainers may not like to see, there are a few that seem to emerge from time to time no matter how well prepared they may be. Knowing how to effectively and respectfully respond to these challenges can increase trainers' comfort level and help maintain a positive learning atmosphere.

Trainers have identified the following eight behaviors as "difficult":

1. Holding side conversations
2. Disputing the information presented
3. Dominating the discussion
4. Rambling on and on
5. Promoting inappropriate practices
6. Mismanaging cell phone use
7. Exhibiting hard-to-read body language
8. Making excuses

After each behavior is a list of possible strategies you could use depending upon how well you know the group and your own personality and temperament. These strategies can help minimize the negative impact of the behavior of one or two individuals on the larger group. Developing ground rules and having participant wear name tags are essential basic strategies that seem to apply in every case.

1. Holding side conversations is defined as having quiet (or not so quiet) conversations or continually whispering to others during a discussion or presentation.

**Strategies that discourage disruptive side conversations include:**

~ Set the stage for respectful listening and talking at the beginning of the session by discussing ground rules. While you may not be bothered by side conversations, other participants could be.

~ Say "I am having a difficult time listening when there are side conversations going on." Remind the group of "their collective responsibility for making the workshop a success (Bloom, 2000)."

~ Stop talking, put on a smile, and wait for everyone's attention.

~ Ignore the conversation; however, to maintain a safe learning environment, do not wait until another participant publicly complains or asks them to stop.

~ Give one of them a job, for example, to role play or be the recorder for the group.

~ Ask, "Do you have something to share with the group?" Be cautious about using this strategy if it might embarrass anyone publicly. This strategy is most effective when the group has been together for a while and it is likely that the individuals are discoursing about something relevant to the topic.

~ Move around the room to position yourself closer to them. Use eye contact or a hand on a shoulder as you continue with your presentation.

~ Privately ask each one to please listen and be respectful of the whole group.

If you notice that people have clustered in cliques as they arrive, make sure in your first interactive exercise to group people in such a way as to break up the clique. This in itself can change the group dynamic and reduce disruptive behavior. ~ Bloom

2. Disputing the information presented means questioning the material endlessly and disputing solid information with anecdotal evidence. Critical thinking is always

welcome, but this behavior is more persistent and less well-founded.

**Strategies for addressing disputation include:**

~ "Avoid sounding defensive and never use sarcasm or biting humor in response to hostile questions. A flip-pant remark can antagonize a hostile person and create a real power struggle. Instead, use phrases like 'I see where you are coming from,' or 'I appreciate your perspective.'" (Bloom, 2004)

~ Address misinformation directly. Be prepared to cite the sources for your own information based on current research, best practices, and solid experience.

~ Remain open to different views, but keep session learning objectives front and center. It helps to inform participants about objectives at the beginning.

~ Turn to the wisdom of the group. Ask "what do some of the rest of you think about this issue?"

A hostile, argumentative, or irreverent remark is sometimes due to cognitive dissonance—when a person is trying to protect existing beliefs and prejudices by rejecting contradictory information. ~ Bloom

3. Dominating the discussion may be accompanied by a know-it-all attitude. This behavior can inhibit others from speaking up during discussion.

**Strategies for balancing participant input with the training agenda include:**

~ Listen politely but do not be afraid to get back on topic. You might say, "That is an interesting perspective, but let's get back to the question at hand" or "I'd be interested in where you got that information. Would you share that with me later?"

~ Set the stage for everyone's input. Give people a chance to reflect upon the issue or question and write ideas down. As individuals share written ideas, perhaps in a round robin, there is a real sense that everyone has something to offer.

~ "Avoid eye contact, and direct questions away from the person who is dominating the discussion toward other members of the group. You can say, 'Amy, we've

heard your perspective several times this morning. Are there others who would like to express their opinion on this issue?'" (Bloom, 2004)

~ Allow sufficient time for questions, discussion, and processing information.

The trick to handling [people who dominate the discussion] is that you don't want to dampen their enthusiasm, you just want to temper their dominating presence in the group. ~ Bloom

4. Rambling on and on occurs when an individual tells a story or raises an issue in a long-winded, irrelevant manner. Others in the group may disengage, daydream, chat with their neighbor, or basically tune out—you know you're losing their attention!

**Strategies for keeping contributions relevant, brief, and to the point include:**

~ You may wish to set a ground rule about being "precise and concise when commenting before the whole group (Bloom, 2000)."

~ It seems obvious that the group could select a person to serve as "timer" whenever group discussion occurs. This person can use a simple hand signal or yield sign as a soundless reminder that time is up.

~ Sometimes you can make a contribution relevant by stating the core issue and asking the group for ideas that relate it to the focus topic.

~ Listen politely and say, "Wow, that's a dilemma, but we can't solve that one now. Could you and I talk about that afterwards?"

~ Many times an individual's concern is widely shared. Don't be afraid to facilitate group problem-solving and relate the discussion to the principles and concepts being studied.

People who ramble are often unaware of how they repeat themselves and digress from the main point they are trying to make. They have no idea how time is ticking away, how a simple response that should have taken less than a minute to make has stretched into five or six minutes. ~ Bloom

5. Promoting inappropriate practices occurs when someone reveals an inappropriate, illegal, or dangerous practice. The individual in this case may or may not realize the practice is questionable.

**Strategies for responding to stories of inappropriate practice include:**

~ Set the stage for development of a climate of respect and trust at the beginning of the session; group dynamics will then be primed to work to your advantage.

~ Do not ignore. Your silence may condone it in some way. Others in the group will look to you for guidance, feedback, and expertise. You have an ethical obligation to help people understand why something is inappropriate and the appropriate practices that are available. Professional conduct demands that adult educators "shall provide information about disparities between best practice and commonly accepted practice to better prepare students to face ongoing challenges related to their work with children (NAEYC, 2004)."

~ Be up front without belittling or embarrassing the individual by saying, "I'm concerned about washing a child's mouth out with soap for using a bad word. How else could we deal with this behavior?" Chances are someone will respond with an appropriate strategy.

~ Remind everyone that in the business of early care and education, the focus is children. Appropriate practice passes the litmus test: is it safe, healthy, and supportive of child growth and development or could it in any way harm children physically, socially, emotionally, or cognitively? Having the knowledge to be able to choose strategies that are safe, healthy, and developmentally appropriate is precisely why child growth and development must be the foundation of everything that is done in early childhood programs.

... other participants will be looking at you and watching how you handle the situation. They are more interested in your tone and how you treat the person than what you actually say. ~ Bloom

6. Mismanaging cell phone use is becoming more common and tends to disrupt the flow of the session. One trainer said she just ignores them completely and hopes they go away (the phones, that is)!

**Strategies for coping with cell phones:**

~ Feel comfortable setting ground rules that include both calls and text messaging. Ask participants to switch cell phones to vibrate or turn them off.

~ Remind people to quickly answer and leave the room if they do get an important call.

~ Give participants a way to catch up if they have to leave, such as making sure they have handouts passed while they were gone or assigning someone to fill them in on what happened. This reinforces the importance of both learning time and participants' needs.

7. Exhibiting hard-to-read body language means there are participants (or worse, a whole room) who are giving you little discernable feedback in their facial expressions, body language, and other non-verbal cues.

**Strategies for reading and responding to participant body language:**

~ Always take time to get to know the group so you can individualize throughout the session. Sometimes the smallest piece of information during introductions can be used later to connect with someone.

~ Revisit your methodology for training. Get participants involved from the beginning! Try a "pair and share" activity, a group brainstorm, or small group discussions or tasks. Pose a question for individual reflection before a group discussion. If the whole group is lackluster or hard to read you may need to get them up, moving, and interacting.

~ If there is one person in particular, try to engage the person specifically without putting him or her on the spot. Use the person's name in an illustration of what you are teaching: "Let's say Melissa is really having a tough time telling parents they need to come and pick up their child when the child is sick. What are some ideas you might suggest to help her with this dilemma?" or give her a job: "Jody, would you please give each person two post-it notes for this next activity?"

Sometimes all it takes is a bit of personal attention to transform a disinterested person into an enthusiastic and eager participant. ~ Bloom

8. Making excuses is troubling when there always seems to be a crisis, emergency, or sickness that prevents the individual from attending, arriving on time, fully participating, staying until the end, getting assignments in on time, following instructions, etc.

#### Strategies for dealing with constant excuses:

~ Set very clear requirements and expectations both verbally and in writing.

~ Be empathetic, but firm, about expectations. You quickly learn whose excuse is genuine and who uses this behavior excessively. Follow through with established consequences.

~ Speak to the individual after the session or set up a meeting time. Revisit expectations, and work out a plan together to remediate the problems. Ask him or her to write up the plan and include timelines for accomplishing the steps. Hold them to it!

#### CONCLUSION

Time after time, trainers and instructors ask for ideas about how to deal with "difficult" participants. However, this is a label that trainers need to use with care. As you learn more about yourself and about individuals in your training, you are likely to discover that there are really very few "difficult" participants.

It seems like everything changes when you discover the

context for an individual's behavior. When understanding is not enough, a few practical strategies can be implemented to respectfully manage troubling behavior so it does not interfere with either that individual's growth or other participants' learning.

Despite the emotional energy that difficult participants take, some of the most rewarding moments you'll experience as a trainer will be associated with those difficult people whom you were able to transform in some small way—the disinterested, reluctant participant who leaves your workshop energized and revitalized. ~ Bloom

#### RESOURCES\*

\* Code of Ethical Conduct: Supplement for Early Childhood Adult Educators (2004) - NAEYC. The joint position statement may be found at [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org).

\* A Conceptual Framework for Professional Development (1993) - NAEYC. This position statement may be found at [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org); currently under revision.

\* Workshop Essentials: Planning and Presenting Dynamic Workshops by Paula Jorde Bloom (2000). New Horizons: Lake Forest, IL.

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