

challenging behavior

step by step sifting — part I

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

Elena is sitting at the side of the room kicking at a nearby chair and making popping noises with her mouth. The rest of the children are at story circle, but Elena was sent to the time-out chair for being disruptive. It is difficult to ignore her continued noises.

What causes challenging behavior and what can we do about it? That is a basic question parents and caregivers face everyday. Some needs are easy to meet, others take more work, and some require outside help

What problems do you experience?

Send a description, a short word 'snapshot' of the situation.

Each issue, we will address your real-life issues.

To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear.

Elements of several problems may be combined for this column.

Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

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– Solution –

(This is the first of a multi-part series about dealing with Challenging Behavior, both at home and school.)

Sifting

It helps to have a systematic response when dealing with challenging behaviors. Imagine that we have a pile of earth composed of sand and rocks, and maybe a few boulders. By using different screens we can sift through this pile. First, we'll use a fine mesh screen to remove the sand. In behavioral terms, sand represents the most common needs, such as hunger or tiredness. These are basic 'conditions' that affect behavior, so we'll call this 'Conditional' sifting.

What's left behind after we've sifted out the sand? Our second screen needs larger holes to allow larger rocks through, or those behaviors and needs that require more effort to be removed. Here we will look at the child's development (age appropriate) and behavior (attention-getting, power struggles), how his perspective (birth order, temperament) influences his behavior and the behavior (rigid, punitive, inconsistent) and attitudes/expectations of adults (why is this upsetting?). How do these interact? This is 'Behavioral' sifting.

Once we have sifted out *Conditions* and *Behaviors*, we face a final sifting, those real-life boulders — problems too big to handle without help. We'll call



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them, *Critical Needs* (biological, psychological, emotional).

Critical Needs can be daunting, but the progression of our siftings will have reduced the risk that we confuse mere molehills with real mountains, or mistake 'problem behaviors' for 'behavior problems'. Today we will do the first, 'Conditional Sifting'.

The process

Each time we sift, we'll follow a series of four repeatable steps. They are:

- 1) Discover
- 2) Decide
- 3) Do
- 4) Refine

We *DISCOVER* pertinent facts and details: "What is going on?"

Then we *DECIDE* on possible interpretations and responses: "Why is this happening? What can I change?"

Then we *DO* something different: "What will I try? When? How?"

Finally, we *REFINE* what we did: "Did it work? What happened? If not, what next?" We repeat this Sifting and try a different response, or go on to the next level of Sifting.

Conditional siftings

Conditional siftings look at *conditions* in our lives. Just as the beach is mainly sand, a variety of *conditions* lie beneath many challenging behaviors. The three types of *conditions* are:

- Physical
- Environmental
- Situational
 - Internal
 - External

■ PHYSICAL CONDITIONS

Physical conditions affect our bodies (hunger, fatigue, discomfort).

• **Discover:** *When does the behavior occur?*

Physical conditions often show up through timing and patterns. In the first example, Elena has been asked to leave circle. A simple checklist over a week's time may show that Elena gets sent away from morning story circle 4 out of 5 days.

• **Decide:** *Are there any patterns that can be connected to physical needs?*

If Elena usually is disruptive only before lunch story time: Could she be hungry? Can we be sure she gets a mid-morning snack?

If her problems occur only before nap: Could she be tired? Would snuggling on a teacher's lap during story time help her manage better?

If Elena's behavior worsens on days without outside playtime: Could she need movement and physical release? Would preceding story time with an active song like the Hokey Pokey improve things?

• **Do:** *Choose a possible response and try it.* Perhaps we noticed that Elena's worst misbehavior coincides with those times she has an ear infection. Maybe, we could offer books for her to browse alone, instead of joining group time.

Or, perhaps Elena is disruptive at dinnertime at home. Her dad suspects that late afternoon snacking contributes to the problem. He restricts snacks an hour before dinner to see if being hungry improves Elena's mealtime participation.

• **Refine:** "What happened?" If what we tried worked — Congratulations! If not, we Refine. Instead of offering Elena books to look at on her own, we might let her do some drawing. Or we could see if a mid-morning snack improved things. If none of those worked, we can move ahead to sift out *Environmental Conditions*.

■ ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

Environmental conditions are a combination of the Physical Environment and the Skills expected or needed to be successful in that environment. In other words, what is it that a child is expected to do or not to do?

• **Discover:** *In what settings do problems occur?*

- Indoors
- During free play
- On the playground
- In the nap room
- During group activities
- During individual play

Let's say Elena has trouble only during group story times.

• **Decide:** *What skills are expected in each setting?*

Different settings require different skills. During group story time, Elena is expected to sit or lie beside others while an adult reads or tells a story. This is a social environment and requires cooperation and impulse control — both weak areas for Elena.

By changing the physical environment we can change the skills needed, in this case — we can give Elena a break from the group.

Assign her a task during story circle, such as block clean up with an aide, allowing her to be productive and contributing — rather than disruptive and distracting.

• **Do:** *Choose a possible response and try it.* We might also make expectations flexible, while Elena's skills develop and improve.

"Elena, you may join us for story. You will need to sit quietly. If you do not sit quietly you may go to the back table and draw until our story is over." This is firm and clear. Giving choices empowers.

If (or when) Elena begins to fidget, the teacher can say, "Elena, you have chosen to color today. Please do that now."

The adult remains respectful and avoids giving attention to undesirable behavior.

• **Refine:** *What happened? Did it work? If not, repeat this sequence with a different choice or move forward to the next level of Conditional sifting: Situational.*

■ SITUATIONAL CONDITIONS:

Situations influence our interactions with others and the world around us. Some situations are *Internal* (unique to a family or classroom/limited in scope), while others arise from *External* events (affecting a broad population).

INTERNAL SITUATIONS: *Internal*

Situations are those that apply to one family, classroom, or child (the birth of a sibling, a teacher leaving, or other changes).

• **Discover:** *When did the behavior begin? Timing is a tip-off to a changed situation. Has Elena become uncooperative in only the past two months? This answer requires information gathering.*

Work with other staff to determine if the changed situation may be center-based, such as a teacher leaving or a switch in daily routines.

- Talk over problems at a staff or team meeting
- Consult with a Center Director

If no changes are uncovered at school, a parent conference is needed. By now the family should have been alerted to concerns, through notes or conversations, and informed of what remedies have been tried. Ask:

- Are there similar problems at home? If so, what or how has the family tried to work through them?

Look for changes:

- What may be different (new baby, separation, grandparent ill)?
- Does the family need help handling a change?

• **Decide:** *Could the behavior be related to a changed situation at home or at school? Situational changes can be easy to underestimate. At Elena's conference, her family explained that they were living with grandparents while their home was remodeled. Because Elena adores her grandparents, it never occurred to anyone that this situation could be related to Elena's newly disruptive behavior.*

Once her teacher found out about Elena's changed living situation, he looked for ways to invite Elena to talk about living at Grandma's.

Communication is critical because situational conditions are often beyond anyone's control. We can't change the situation, but we can make coping with it easier.

• **Do:** *Select what changes to try. Work with families to coordinate responses and keep communication open.*

Elena's teacher decided to build a house with Elena in the block area. While playing, Elena said, "We don't have a swing set in Grandma's yard."

"Did you have one in your yard?" he asked.

"Yes. We have to stay inside at Grandma's."

The teacher shared Elena's comments with her parents and they began regularly stopping at a nearby playground on their way home.

Talking about difficult situations relieves distress. Adults can commiserate or clear up confused thinking. If Elena

thinks she will never get to return to her bedroom, her teacher and parents could reassure her that this move is temporary.

• **Refine:** *Did it work? If not, either repeat this sifting or move to the next Sifting.*

■ EXTERNAL SITUATIONS

Once *Internal Situations* are addressed or ruled out, we look for *External Situations*, ones that involve the larger world around us.

Children are aware of external events — but cannot make sense of them. If the people they love are worried and anxious — a child may decide that her behavior, perhaps not cleaning her room, is to blame.

• **Discover:** *What might be affecting this child's feelings of safety? What is happening in the community, nation, or globally?*

- Is a factory closing and unemployment fear high?
- Are flood, earthquake, or other disaster victims in the news?
- Has a local park shut down because of drug dealing?

• **Decide:** *How can we help this child or family cope with widespread distress or anxiety?*

Perhaps Elena's family lives near a park closed for safety, which means she has been confined to her family's apartment with infrequent outdoor playtime. How might we increase her access to outdoor activities?

• **Do:** *Offer reassurance/support, both at home and at school.*

Upon hearing about Elena's limited outdoor playtime, her teachers extended morning recess until Elena's arrival, so that she could climb and race around before settling down for quieter classroom expectations. Other ways to help children relieve stress are:

- Provide water play (soothing).
- Read stories of children with similar experiences to spark discussions of children's fears.

—Provide art supplies and encourage children to draw about things that scare them. Use the drawings to talk about fears.

• **Refine:** *Because situations often cannot be changed, improved behavior may be the best we can manage. As before, we can repeat this or a previous sifting. If there is little or no improvement, however, we move to the next Sifting.*

Next time

'Conditional Siftings' resolve many challenging behaviors — but not all. Some problems will remain.

In our next siftings, 'Behavioral,' we'll identify behaviors (ours and theirs) and the possible messages* those behaviors might be sending (both ways).

*For a detailed look at the 'Messages of Misbehavior,' read *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers* (Nelsen, Erwin, & Duffy, 2007).

To download a blank template to use in your own sifting process (for center or home use), go to www.childcareexchange.com. The template can be downloaded at no charge for the duration of the multi-part 'Challenging Behavior' series.

To share your experiences with the sifting process go to: www.RoslynDuffy.com.

First Sifting: Conditional

■ Physical Conditions

Conditions that affect our bodies

■ Environmental Conditions

Conditions in the surrounding environment and the expectations represented or imposed by those conditions

■ Situational Conditions

Specific situations that influence interactions

- *Internal:* Situations unique to a family, classroom, or individual child
- *External:* Situations beyond the confines of family or center