

# challenging behavior

## step-by-step sifting: part 2

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 second of a multi-part series about dealing with Challenging Behavior, both at home and school.)*

#### Behavioral sifting: the child

In our first segment (Challenging Behavior — Part 1: Conditional Sifting, *Exchange*, November/December, 2009) we examined the **Conditions** that might influence a child's behavior. We compared this, the initial Sifting in our process, to that of removing sand or the most common problems from consideration.

Next come **Behavioral** Sifting. Unlike the sand removed during **Conditional** Sifting, **Behavioral** Sifting uncovers bigger bits of gravel or small rocks, comparable to those behaviors that present bigger challenges and need different strategies to sort them out.

This first sequence of **Behavioral** Sifting will look at the CHILD'S behavior. We begin with **Developmental** or Age-Appropriate Expectations as well as individual Skill Levels. Next come **Perceptual** Sifting. These address how a child seeks to achieve a feeling of **Belonging** in inappropriate ways known as 'Mistaken Goal'\* behavior (attention-getting, power struggles, revenge, and assumed inadequacy). Finally, we will look at **Intrinsic** behaviors, those related to a child's Temperament and Birth Order.



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We will use the same process as before:

- **Discover:** *What is going on? Gather information.*
- **Decide:** *Why is this happening and what can be changed?*
- **Do:** *What will I try? When? How?*
- **Refine:** *Did it work? If not, what next? Either repeat this Sifting and try a different response, or move to another level of Sifting.*

## Behavioral sifting: the child

Using the same example as in our first, or Conditional Siftings, let's assume that Elena's challenging behavior has continued. Our progression for **Behavioral sifting: the child**, will be:

### CHILD BEHAVIOR

#### Developmental Sifting

Age-Appropriate Expectations,  
Skill Levels



#### Perceptual Sifting: Belonging

'Mistaken Goal' behavior  
(attention-getting, power struggles,  
revenge, assumed inadequacy)



#### Perceptual Sifting: Intrinsic

Temperament  
Birth Order

## CHILD BEHAVIORS

When concerned about challenging behavior, of course we look to what it is the child is doing or her behavior. In this stage of the sifting process we'll break down the types of behavior we may be seeing.

### DEVELOPMENTAL SIFTING

*Development* refers to what this child can do. Do our Expectations match her Skill

Level? It may seem strange to add this as a step in our process, but it is surprisingly easy to look at a child, large (or small) for his age, and assume he has the skills of an older (or younger) child. We know to expect certain behaviors at different ages (refer to *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*, edited by Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp, NAEYC, Third Edition, 2009). Are our expectations in line with this child's development? Let's take a look.

- **Discover:** *What is this child's age? What expectations are appropriate for a child of this age?*
- **Decide:** *Are our expectations and this child's development in sync? Is this child developmentally on target?*

*If Elena were a toddler, sitting with a group or remaining in a designated place during story circle may be beyond her capabilities. However, if Elena were five, expecting such skills would be reasonable. What specific skills are lacking?*

This process allows us to adjust expectations or to maintain appropriate ones, but focus on skill training and practice.

- **Do:** *Choose a response in line with a child's development.*

Making group time shorter might lead to success for Elena, the toddler. At age five, asking Elena to go over what is expected before story circle begins could help her to behave appropriately, because the expectations will be fresh in her mind. For now, we'll assume Elena is five and her teacher takes a moment to prepare for circle time by asking Elena what she needs to do during story circle:

'Sit in my own space.'  
'Raise my hand before talking.'  
'Don't make noises or poke others.'

- **Refine:** *Did it work? Great! If not, try again with a different plan or proceed to the next Sifting.*

### PERCEPTUAL SIFTING: Belonging

The term 'Mistaken Goal' is a *Positive Discipline*\* term used to identify four basic ways in which children seek to establish a sense of 'belonging', whether at home, school, or elsewhere. The basic premise is that all children (and adults) want to feel a sense of belonging and significance, but they (and we) often go about doing so in 'mistaken' ways. These typically include:

- Attention (I need to keep others focused on me)
- Power (I can prove that you can't make me)
- Revenge (I'm hurt, so I'll hurt others or their things)
- Assumed Inadequacy (I can't do it well enough — so don't expect much of me)

When identifying 'Mistaken Goal' behaviors, it helps to look at a situation from a child's perspective.

- **Discover:** *What does this child's behavior achieve? Are other children laughing at her antics or is the teacher always busy with her (attention)? Is she defiantly doing/not doing something she should/shouldn't be (power)? Could she be upset about something and reacting with a hurtful response (revenge)? Does she feel unable to meet expectations (assumed inadequacy)?*
- **Decide:** *There is little doubt that Elena's circle time behavior results in lots of attention, both from classmates and her teachers. Even though this attention may be negative (being sent to time-out), as far as a child is concerned, it is still attention.*

Another clue to a child's 'Mistaken Goal' is the adult's emotional response. Attention-getting behaviors tend to

trigger annoyance and irritation (whereas power struggles elicit feelings of being challenged; revenge-hurt, disbelieving; inadequacy — helpless, hopeless). Since Elena's teacher feels annoyed more than anything else, we will focus on 'attention' as Elena's probable 'Mistaken Goal'.

Perhaps her teacher could designate a place where Elena could look at books if she chooses not to participate in group time or if her behavior becomes disruptive. Elena and her teacher would need to discuss and agree upon such a plan, (before, not during, a reoccurrence of Elena's misbehavior).

*Please Note:* This is a similar solution to the one chosen in a previous Sifting (physical), but the focus this time is on 'Attention' implications. The important thing when sifting out 'Mistaken Goal' behaviors is to gain insight into how a child tries to 'belong' or establish her role in the group (or family).

- **Do:** *Once a place is designated for Elena to go to when she is disruptive, getting her there will need to happen with as little attention as possible.* Perhaps a signal (the teacher wiggling her own earlobe) that would tell Elena it is time to go to her book area. Or, a classroom aide could gently lead Elena there, without the group's activity being interrupted.

*TIP:* It may take several tries for a new plan to succeed. Behavior sometimes worsens, at first, as children check to see if we'll maintain our new response or if they can get us to 'change back' to our more familiar reactions. ('Change Back'\* behavior is explained in detail in the chapter "Change," *The Top Ten Preschool Parenting Problems*, Duffy, Exchange Press, 2008).

- **Refine:** *What happened?* If it worked — Congratulations! If not, Refine.

Instead of having Elena leave after misbehaving, we might set increasing goals for her participation. After five or ten minutes, she can be excused to her book area. These intervals can be increased in increments, so that Elena gets positive and appropriate attention for her successes, instead of attention only for misbehavior.

If none of this worked, we move to the next Sifting.

#### PERCEPTUAL SIFTING: Intrinsic — Temperament

*Temperament* is individual and uniquely our own. From birth, temperament predisposes us to certain tendencies, such as activity level, adaptability, or persistence.\*\*

- **Discover:** *What do we know about this child?* Is she shy, enthusiastic, predictable?

Let's say we know that Elena is new to this classroom and that her previous teacher had noted, "it often takes Elena quite a while to adjust to even simple changes in classroom routine."

- **Decide:** *It would be reasonable to assume that Elena may have a slow-to-warm-up Temperament.* The appearance of her misbehavior after being transferred to an unfamiliar classroom could reflect discomfort triggered by temperament.
- **Do:** *Instead of sending Elena away from story circle, ask her if she might be more comfortable watching from the sidelines.* Set up a chair where she can watch what is going on. Offer to move the chair closer every day, until she feels ready to be a full participant.
- **Refine:** *What happened?* If it worked — Congratulations! If not, Refine.

Perhaps Elena will need to transition from her observer's chair to the

teacher's lap or to a seat next to an aide. Slow down, and keep trying.

If none of this worked, we move to the next Sifting.

#### PERCEPTUAL SIFTING: Intrinsic — Birth Order

Each of us has a unique view of the world based on *Birth Order*. Birth Order is a bit like the view from different windows of the same house (or in this case, one's family position). We all see things a bit differently, based on this unique vantage point.

- **Discover:** *Is Elena an only child? The third or fourth in her family?* Let's say we know that Elena is the youngest child in a family of three girls. Youngest children enjoy entertaining others.
- **Decide:** *Do Elena's classmates find her disruptive behavior entertaining?* Yes, they do. How else might Elena entertain without being disruptive? Look for ways to include her before she becomes disruptive.
- **Do:** *Her teacher asked Elena to demonstrate a dance at group time. Another day, when the class read a story about ducks, Elena imitated quacking, which the class echoed.* These opportunities achieve Elena's goal of entertaining, but in acceptable ways.
- **Refine:** *What happened?* If it worked — Congratulations! If not, Refine.

Elena still needs to graduate to joining in the group's activities, but by leading activities her participation skills will be improving, too. If none of this worked, we move to the next Sifting.

#### Next time

If, after these siftings, the challenging behavior remains unchanged or worsens, we need to proceed to

**Behavioral Sifting: Adult Behaviors.**

We will look at *Adult Behaviors — Attitudinal Sifting: Generalized Expectations* and *Interpersonal Sifting: Adult Discipline and Skills* or *Adult Reactions, Consistency, and Follow-Through*.

To share your experiences with the Sifting process go to:

[www.RoslynDuffy.com](http://www.RoslynDuffy.com).

\*For a detailed look at the 'Messages of Misbehavior' and 'Birth Order' (including explanatory charts), read *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers*, Nelsen, Erwin, & Duffy, 2007.

\*\*Information on the 'Nine Temperaments' appears in both *Positive Discipline: The First Three Years*, Nelsen, Erwin, & Duffy, Three Rivers Press, Random House, 2007 and *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers*, Nelsen, Erwin, & Duffy, Three Rivers Press, Random House, 2007.

Download a blank template to use in your own Sifting process (for center or home use).

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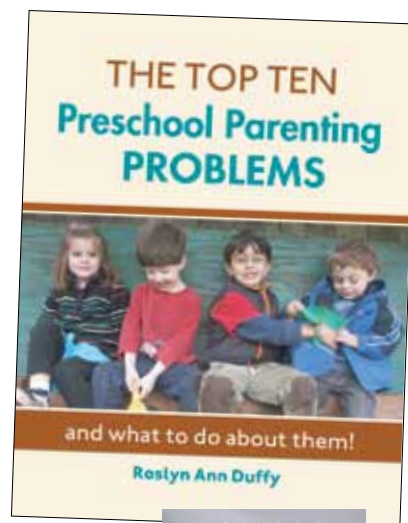
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