

PRACTICE

Using High-Quality Behavior Guidance Policies to Support Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Learning Environments and Interrupt Implicit Bias

by Sarah Garrity and Sascha Longstreth

Early childhood teachers and administrators often feel unprepared to deal with children's challenging behavior and report that behavior problems are the most challenging aspect of their work. Using the Teaching and Guidance Policy Essentials Checklist to develop high-quality, evidence-based behavior guidance policies can help early childhood programs by providing an infrastructure that supports the social, emotional and academic success of all children. Importantly, behavior guidance policies can also be used to address disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion based on race, by supporting linguistically and culturally appropriate environments and experiences, ongoing

professional development that ensures staff have a strong understanding of culture and diversity, and the use of data to ensure that decision making is fair and equitable. An important first step in creating an evidence-based behavior guidance policy is to examine your own beliefs about discipline and guidance.

We intentionally use the term behavior guidance policy rather than discipline in our work, and this distinction is key to our philosophical approach. While the Latin root of the word "discipline" means *discipulus* or pupil, its meaning has evolved over the years to be synonymous with punishment. Rather than trying to prevent challenging behaviors from occurring, many discipline policies focus on what will happen after the challenging behavior has already occurred. In contrast, behavior guidance is preventative, and refers to the practice of teaching children social-emotional skills such as self-regulation, cooperation, empathy and responsibility. In this way, both prevention and teaching are central to the definition of behavior guidance. The TAGPEC is based on our humanistic approach to behavior guidance presented in Figure 1.

The role of the adult is to teach children appropriate social-emotional skills. Traditional approaches to discipline typically involve punishing children for misbehavior; valuing obedience rather than learning; and the use of strategies that may hurt, shame or belittle children. Behavior guidance, on the other hand, focuses on teaching children socially accepted behavior. It involves identifying appropriate and inappropriate behaviors; teaching children effective strate-

Figure 1

| A Humanistic Approach to Behavior Guidance |
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| The role of the adult is to teach children appropriate social-emotional skills |
| Relationships guide and regulate behaviors |
| Behavior is communication |
| Each child is a unique individual |
| Implicit bias affects decision-making |

gies for expressing their emotions and solving their conflicts; and helping children to develop self-regulatory skills such as impulse control, empathy and perspective-taking.

Relationships guide and regulate behavior. Relationships are the foundation for teaching and learning in the early years, and positive relationships provide a powerful context for learning. When teachers respond to children's needs in ways that are responsive and caring, they establish trust and an emotional connection, which in turn helps the child feel heard and understood. A teacher's ability to respond to children's negative emotional cues and behaviors with sensitivity is a hallmark of a humanistic approach, and helps to develop a deeper and more secure relationship with the child.

Behavior is communication. A child's challenging behavior is a signal that something is not right. Behavior sends a message that children are tired, hungry, frightened, bored, sad or angry—or a combination of any of these. Often, when they act out, children lack the skills to express their needs appropriately, or they are too dysregulated to use the skills they have. A child who does not feel safe, for example, may try to seek order and control by getting everything in the classroom to come to a complete stop by pushing over a cubby or throwing a chair.

Each child is a unique individual. Individual differences describe the multiple characteristics that distinguish us from one another and make us unique, including temperament, energy level, motivation and interests. It is also critical to note that children develop in multiple contexts, including their family, their community, and as recipients of public policy, and that these contexts interact in complex and dynamic ways.

Implicit bias affects decision making. Implicit biases are the unconscious beliefs and stereotypes that are made unintentionally and unknowingly (Banks, Eberhardt, & Ross, 2006) and influence our perceptions, interactions, behaviors, and feelings toward others in ways that we are unconscious of. Because implicit bias often affects the decisions we make, especially when we are faced with the stress and emotion that often accompany children's challenging behaviors, it is essential that early childhood educators intentionally and systematically work to identify and address implicit bias. Returning to the key assumptions of the humanistic approach and examining data related to challenging behavior can help to interrupt these decision points.

So how can the TAGPEC and its humanistic approach to behavior guidance be used to develop policies that are evidence-based and support all children? Table 1 provides examples of exemplar policy statements for items 4, 10, 24, 28 and 30 of the TAGPEC.

It is important to note that early childhood programs come in many forms: for profit, nonprofit, Head Start, state preschool, faith-based, family child care programs, and campus-based child care. They also vary in size, location (rural and urban), and purpose. There is no one size fits all behavior guidance policy, and policies should reflect each program's unique context. We hope that the TAGPEC can be used to help early childhood professionals develop and implement high-quality, evidence-based behavior guidance policies that support the success of all children.



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Table 1:
Exemplar Statements Supporting Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Behavior Guidance Policies

| Essential Feature and Item | Exemplar Statement |
|---|--|
| <p>Item 4: Multiple, evidence-based, developmentally and culturally appropriate strategies are described. (EF 1)</p> | <p>Our staff will use a positive approach to guidance, which enables a child to develop self-control and assume responsibility for his/her own behavior. We will foster and guide a child's choices so his/her behavior will reflect peaceful human relationships with other children and adults. We will provide an age appropriate environment that is stimulating and conducive to the development of a positive self-image in each child.</p> <p>The following techniques are developmentally appropriate and best practice, and all employees are expected to know and use these behavior guidance techniques: active listening, redirection, modifying the environment, reinforcing and noticing, setting limits, enforcing natural consequences, negotiation, and facilitating problem solving. Teaching staff are active in identifying and countering any teaching practices, curriculum approaches, or materials that are degrading with respect to gender, sexual orientation, age, language, ability, race, religion, family structure, background or culture. Daily interactions shall demonstrate knowledge of the children they teach, the children's families, and the social, linguistic and cultural context in which children live.</p> <p>Teachers read books that provide "mirrors" that reflect the familiar world of children in their classroom, as well as books that provide "windows" into the history, traditions, and experiences of other cultures and groups.</p> |
| <p>Item 10: The policy clearly describes the value of an engaging curriculum that takes a strengths-based view of culture and language as a deterrent to challenging behavior. (EF 2)</p> | <p>We view children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds as a resource. Teachers plan activities and environments that validate children's lived experiences, as well as their cultural and linguistic identities.</p> <p>Each child's uniqueness (temperament, culture, family background, stage of development, learning style, etc.) adds to the strength and character of the classroom.</p> <p>The early childhood center is committed to incorporating and celebrating diversity in our program. The program encourages the recognition and acceptance of each individual's intrinsic uniqueness. We encourage all families to share their cultural heritage as part of our program on an ongoing basis. This type of activity strengthens the link between a child's home and school and encourages acceptance of differences.</p> <p>The environment is rich in possibilities for exploration of gender, race, culture and ability. Pictures in the classroom are of children, staff and families. Images include women and men doing jobs in and out of the home, people of different ages, different physical abilities, diverse family structures, and diverse cultural backgrounds engaged in current daily activities. Books reflect accurate and diverse images of people. Materials, such as puzzles, Lego people and games depict a variety of children and adults of different genders, races and abilities. Through music, art and language, children have the opportunity to explore and experience diversity.</p> |

Table 1 (continued):

Exemplar Statements Supporting Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Behavior Guidance Policies

| Essential Feature and Item | Exemplar Statement |
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| <p>Item 24: The policy describes the need for obtaining contextually and culturally relevant information (e.g. at-home sleeping and eating habits, family events, favorite toys and activities) from families in order to understand children's inappropriate behavior. (EF 5)</p> | <p>Parents and teachers are encouraged to talk about the child's day. Two-way communication between teachers and parents is key. There may be circumstances that affect the children's behavior at school, such as lack of sleep, a rough morning routine, missed breakfast, or a parent or family member that is out of town. We would love to know more about what your family enjoys doing together and any routines or practices that make your family special!</p> <p>We believe that parents are our partners. We recognize that a child's home is the first and most important place of learning. Any information you give us concerning your family culture, rituals, or challenges helps us better understand your child's needs.</p> |
| <p>Item 28: The policy describes the intent of the program to ensure that staff have a strong understanding of culture and diversity and are provided opportunities to engage in self-reflection and ongoing professional development that encourage awareness of implicit and explicit biases that may affect their work with children and families. (EF 6)</p> | <p>Annual training on issues related to diversity, including culturally and linguistically appropriate practice, helps teachers and program staff to continually reflect on their own practice and consider ways in which they can support the success of all children and families.</p> <p>All staff will be trained on the child guidance policy during the new employee orientation, at staff meetings, and as part of our ongoing professional development program. Staff will be encouraged to routinely reflect on their own life experiences and consider how membership in social groups (gender, race, ethnicity, and social class) may affect their beliefs about cultural diversity and unconsciously result in implicit bias.</p> |
| <p>Item 30: The policy describes how data will be used to engage in continuous improvement in order to ensure that practices are in line with the intent of the behavior guidance policy and to ensure fairness and equity for all children. (EF 7)</p> | <p>Administrators will collect and review multiple forms of data to evaluate the effectiveness of the behavior guidance policy. Data may include referrals to the director, referrals to community services, incident reports, behavior reports, the number of parent conferences, and the number of suspensions and expulsions. A review of the behavior-related data will occur a minimum of once per year. Based on the data, the administrator will make recommendations for the following year for improved guidance practices, revisions in policy language, teacher professional development and improved data-collection strategies.</p> |