

# 4 STEPS TO HELP CHILDREN WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR IN THE CLASSROOM



**Muriel K. Rand**  
The Positive Classroom



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## WHAT IS CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR?

Even in classrooms in which you've established a positive learning environment with effective behavior management strategies, there may be children with challenging behaviors. A child may act violently, lashing out physically. Another might attack verbally. A child might not be able to sit and focus, rolling on the carpet and crawling around on the floor. I've seen a child so angry he threw the items on the teacher's desk out the window. In classrooms with younger children, you may have a child who bites and scratches, or screams and throws herself on the floor. And then a child may simply withdraw, his head down on the desk, curled up on the carpet, disengaged from the classroom environment.



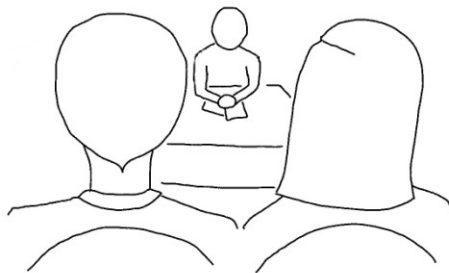
This booklet will help you to begin to understand how the environment in your classroom can be contributing to maintaining these behaviors. It is tempting to assume that the “dysfunction” is found only in the child, but that is not true. We all respond to the forces and interactions in and around us, changing our actions depending on the responses we get. Children do too. This is actually good news for us, because it means if we change some things in the classroom environment, we can help the



child change her behavior. Most teachers consider classroom discipline as the way they *react* to inappropriate behavior. This booklet is about being *proactive* so that challenging behavior doesn't occur.

*But what about the parents?* Aren't these children acting out because their parents haven't taught them how to behave properly? Probably. But that is not an excuse for them to continue to behave inappropriately at school. You can control the environment in your classroom, and this can have a big effect on the children's behaviors, even those who come from homes in which the behaviors we want at school are not taught or encouraged. As long as you continue to blame the parents for bad behavior of children, or look for reasons for the behavior that are outside of your classroom, you will be frustrated and angry. You can make the decision, instead, to help a child change his behavior.

The essence of positive behavioral support is that good behavior must be taught, just like we'd teach a child to read or count. We need to work with families, rather than blame them, or expect them to change the child's behavior on their own. The process is not easy or quick, but it *will* work. And it can make your life, the life of the rest of the children in your class, and the life of that child much better. Most of all, the advice in this booklet will help you enjoy teaching more!






## WHY DO KIDS DO THAT?

Children use challenging behavior because it gets them what they need. They might be using inappropriate behaviors for many reasons. Perhaps they have been taught those behaviors outside of school. Perhaps they are lacking in social and emotional skills. The child might have a disability that makes learning social skills or verbal interactions difficult. It may be that a child has been neglected, or abused. Most likely, it's because children learn all sorts of things at different rates. Some children learn to behave in school quickly – just like some children learn to read quickly. Some children need more time and targeted assistance to learn how to behave in school – just like some children need extra support to learn to read. We must move away from the idea that a child who misbehaves is “bad” and must be punished, and toward the idea that the child has not yet learned how to behave more appropriately.

By using positive behavioral supports, we make the assumption that most challenging behavior occurs because the child doesn't have better skills to use to solve problems. Usually these are social and emotional skills – and we can teach these skills.

What we can be sure of though, is that once a child starts to use an inappropriate behavior – like screaming and throwing herself on the floor – *she continues to use that behavior because it gets her something she needs*. This is the essence of what special educators call Functional Analysis: a child repeats inappropriate behaviors because those behaviors are being reinforced in the environment. Perhaps the reinforcement is social interaction from the teacher, or getting out of circle time, or getting a desired toy. If the challenging behavior keeps repeating itself, we know it is being reinforced.






Let's take an example from the adult world to understand this better. Why would someone continue to smoke cigarettes when there are such obvious negative consequences: heart disease, cancer, stroke, social disapproval, smelly clothes and breath, and so on. Any reasonable person would stop, so why is it so hard? Because smoking provides various important functions to the smoker:

- Calming down
- Being able to take a break from work and go outside
- Being part of a social group that hangs outside the building to smoke
- Getting the physical nicotine rush
- Feeling sensory/oral satisfaction
- Preventing overeating and weight gain
- Gaining status in being “grown-up” or “cool”

If someone wants to stop smoking, he will need to get these functions met in another way. Willpower alone won't work. And it won't be enough to just use a nicotine patch if the social group experience is also motivating the behavior. The smoker would need to find another way to socialize with friends at work, another way to take breaks, another way to stop overeating, and perhaps another way to gain status. You can see why it is so hard for smokers to change their behavior!

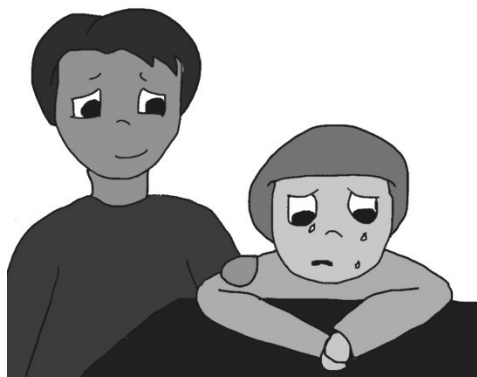
Children have the same complex needs as adults. It might be hard to see what a child gets out of a challenging behavior until we take a closer look. In almost all instances, a child uses challenging behavior for one or both of these reasons:

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1. **To obtain something** (like a toy, attention, social interaction, a preferred activity)
  2. **To escape something** (like seatwork, circle time, tests)

Let's take a closer look at both of these functions. A few examples will help us see how challenging behaviors help children get these functions met.


### CHILDREN'S SKILL IN OBTAINING WHAT THEY NEED

Let's take the case of Brandon, a 1<sup>st</sup> grade child who whines and then breaks down in tears in the middle of each language arts test, complaining "I can't do this. I'm getting the questions wrong! My parents are gonna kill me!" Brandon actually does well on the tests, but the behavior



continues. The teacher immediately thinks that the parents are the problem because they are putting too much pressure on the child. But she doesn't look closely at her own behavior. Each time Brandon cries, she goes over to his desk

(this behavior is too loud and disruptive to ignore). She tries to sooth him, saying, "You'll do fine, Brandon. Just try your best." She touches his shoulder, gets down close to him and they share a caring, close moment. She lets him get a drink of water and come back to the test. My hypothesis is that what may continue to reinforce Brandon's crying is not his parents' pressure, but the teacher's interactions with him. When else during the day does Brandon get the opportunity




to have one-on-one time with the teacher in such a caring way?

The Golden Rule of challenging behavior is:

***What You Pay Attention To  
You Will Get More Of!***

In the case of Brandon, the challenging behavior stopped when the teacher changed her behavior. She started to give him the same close, warm attention *before* he started to whine. She checked in with him, praised him for getting to work and staying calm, and returned a few times during the test. Eventually, she made sure she was giving him one-on-one attention at other times during the day, and the whining and crying gradually stopped.

You might be thinking, “But what about the child who gets yelled at rather than getting warm, caring attention? How can that be reinforcing his behavior?” It’s helpful to think about the need for attention and interaction as a kind of hunger. When we are really hungry, we will eat and crave just about anything – even junk food we know is bad for us. It’s the same way with the need for social interaction. Children who are very hungry for attention will not stop until they get it. That’s why the old adage “Just ignore him, he’s only asking for attention” usually doesn’t work. He’s asking for attention because he *needs* it. Even the attention of being scolded, lectured or yelled at is better than being ignored. To change the challenging behavior, we need to give the child that positive social interaction with us *when he is behaving properly*. When the hunger is satisfied, there will be less need for the acting out behavior.




I have noticed over my years of observing classrooms that when children use challenging behavior they often obtain a very passionate and intimate experience.

- The teacher is highly emotional (with this emotion focused on the child),
- The teacher gets physically close to the child,
- The teacher often holds the child's arm, or touches the child in some way to control the behavior,
- The interaction is one-on-one and intense.

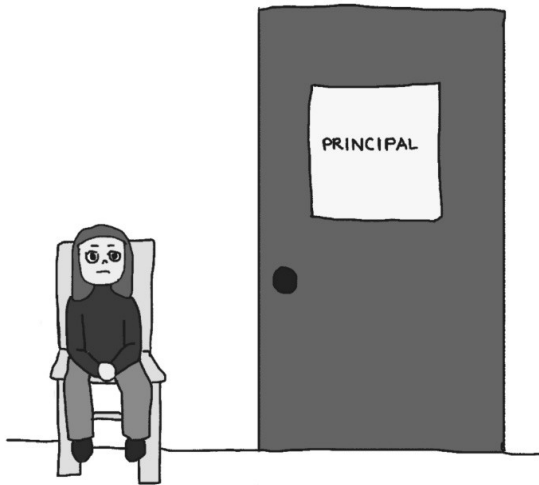
There is no other time during the day that the child would get such an intense, close, and personal interaction with the teacher. This can be highly reinforcing for many children who are starved for attention!

## CHILDREN'S NEED TO ESCAPE

Besides getting attention or social interaction, children also act inappropriately in order to get out of doing things they don't like. Michelle, for example, is typically aggressive whenever the teacher asks her to do something (especially if her tone of voice has an edge to it!) One day in the stairwell, she pushed a child and the teacher yelled at her. She yelled back and an unproductive shouting match ended with Michelle being sent to the principal. After a stern talk with the principal, Michelle was sentenced to detention for a week and was back in the classroom an hour later.



So what was the function of this behavior? Well, Michelle got a break from having to walk quietly in the hall, she got out of the academic activities in class, and she got one-on-one social interaction from both the teacher (even if was yelling) and the principal (even if it was lecturing). She also gained some social status from going to detention where she had a pretty good time sitting with some of her friends, even if it was boring.



It is fascinating to me how often children get out of activities they don't like by using challenging behavior. I don't mean to imply this is done on a conscious level, but it is highly reinforcing for many children to get a short break from the regular classroom routine.



## 4 STEPS TO CHANGING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR

Children use challenging behavior because it gets them what they need. They are often lacking important social/emotional skills so they substitute the challenging behavior. In order to help, we need to know the function of the behavior, and then plan steps to help them teach new, more appropriate behaviors. This process, called Positive Behavior Support, has the following steps:

1. **Analyze.** Determine the trigger and the function of the behavior by examining what happens before and after the behavior happens.
2. **Prevent.** Change the environment, transitions, and task demands to make it less likely for the behavior to occur.
3. **Teach New Skills.** Figure out what behaviors you'd like the child to use instead of the challenging behavior (using words instead of hitting, asking for a break instead of disturbing others). Systematically teach these skills through modeling and practice.
4. **Change Your Response.** If the behavior still occurs, change your response so that the behavior is not reinforced. If the child is obtaining intense interaction then provide less of a reaction. If the child had been escaping activities, ensure the child must still participate or complete the work. Above all, stay calm and do not argue or lecture.

Remember that changing behaviors is a *slow, gradual process* that takes patience and plenty of time. Expect the changes to take weeks or months, although you should see some consistent improvement along the way.



## STEP 1: FIGURE OUT THE FUNCTION OF THE BEHAVIOR

Sometimes it is obvious what the child gains or escapes from the challenging behavior. Sometimes the function is more obscure. Behavioral specialists use the following process to figure out what triggers the behavior and what is reinforcing it:

1. **Antecedent.** The first step is to notice when the behavior typically occurs. You want to determine as precisely as possible what is likely to trigger the behavior. This is important because we'll use this knowledge later to try to prevent the behavior from occurring.
2. **Behavior.** What exactly is the behavior that needs to change? It's helpful to focus first on **one** behavior that you want to work on. Describe that behavior as carefully and specifically as you can so you can be objective. It also helps to track how often it occurs.
3. **Consequences.** What happens as a result of the challenging behavior? Pay particular attention to what you do as a teacher, and what other adults do, like an assistant teacher, specialist, or principal. Also notice what the other children do in reaction.
4. **Function.** The consequences are reinforcing the challenging behavior so use the information in the consequences step to figure out what the function of the behavior is for the child. Does the child obtain anything? Does the child get out of anything?

## STEP 2: PREVENT CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

### Change the physical environment


Think about the triggers and consider what you can adapt to reduce the challenging behavior:

- Is the group area too crowded? Are the children so tightly congested on the rug that they bump into each other? How about giving each child a carpet mat to sit on to define his or her space.
- Is the child unable to stay focused because of distractions? Can the child's desk be moved to a quieter area? This should not be done as a punishment but as an offer to help the child.
- Are the materials too stimulating? Are there too many kinds of food in the house area? Too many blocks in the block area? Consider limiting the materials and rotating them on a regular basis, or limiting the amount of children in each area.
- Do the children have enough room to get to coat hooks or cubbies? If this area is tight, consider limiting the number of children in the area at one time, or allowing the target child to go into that area alone.



- Do children have a clear, defined place to line up? Consider putting a line on the floor, or marks where the children should stand to help them learn appropriate behavior.

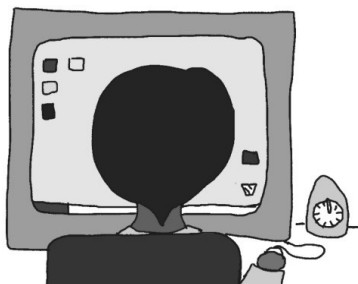





## Change Transitions

Transitions are often the time that most challenging behaviors appear. Changing the routine can often prevent those problems.

- Give plenty of advanced notice to the child when transitions are going to occur. Two or three reminders that count down the time can be helpful.
- Use a visual schedule to show the child what the next transition is. These can be photographs glued to cards and made into a booklet.
- Allow the child to make the transition to the next activity before the other children. Get the child started cleaning up or finishing what he is doing, then get him settled for the next activity while you begin the transition of the rest of the class.
- Use a timer to help the child visually see when her turn will be ending, or when the next activity will begin. An old fashioned, analog timer is better than a digital one since it gives a concrete representation of the time.
- Be sure you teach all the children the appropriate procedures for a transition (how to push in chairs, how to walk across the room, how to put things away, how to sit at circle time, how to line up, etc.). Practice these procedures like a game for a few days in a row or every day until the transitions become smoother and more routine.






## Change Task Demands

Children often use escape behaviors (pencil sharpening, drinks of water, talking to neighbors, etc.) because the task seems overwhelming. Change what you ask the child to do:

- Break the task into smaller steps and give positive feedback for getting through each step. For example, if a child puts away 3 blocks, acknowledge her hard work and give her three more. If a child can't start a three-paragraph essay, ask him to write the first sentence, then give positive feedback and suggest another one.
- Give choices. Would you like to write at your desk or at the table? Do you want to use a pencil or a marker to write with? Which question do you want to start with? Where would you like to sit at the circle? These give the child a feeling of power and control.
- Give the child a break after each step. Allow him to get a drink, walk across the room, stand and stretch, while insisting that after the break, he gets right back to work. An timer can help manage the length of the break.
- Give extra support for getting the work done—perhaps an example of how a paper should look, or a list of key words, numerical sentences, or other scaffolds. Use visual aids that include photos of the steps the child needs to take.
- Teach the children how to work in pairs, sharing the work processes. Alternate between individual work and buddy work.

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- Redirect the child when you notice her getting agitated by task demands. Be proactive. Before the child falls apart into a tantrum or other acting out, suggest she sharpen a pencil, get a drink of water, stand up and stretch, etc.

## Use Visual Aids

Help the child to understand what behavior is expected by providing visual reminders.

- Take a photo of the child engaging in the proper behavior. Print it, glue it to a card and laminate it (such as sitting properly at circle, how to hang up a coat, what a neat desk looks like, how to stand when lining up). Remind the child to refer to the card **before** the inappropriate behavior is likely to happen.



- Post photos for the whole class showing appropriate ways to line up, put away items, wash hands, or sit at group time.
- Use visual markers for lining up, sitting on the carpet, and pathways to move around the room.



### STEP 3: TEACH NEW SKILLS TO REPLACE CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

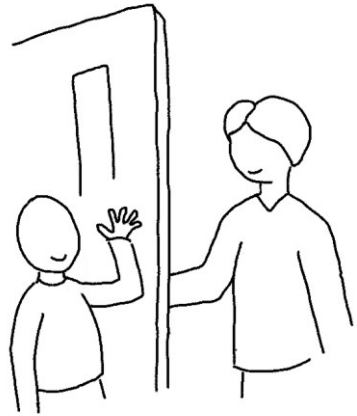
Many children use challenging behavior to get what they need because they don't have the skills to use more positive behavior. This is easily seen when young children grab a toy instead of asking for it, push a child rather than saying "please leave me alone" or knock down a block structure instead of entering the play theme. We also see this lack of skills in primary grade children who can't stay focused, annoy their neighbors, or scream obscenities instead of verbalizing their requests or frustrations.

Children who use challenging behavior often get less positive attention from other children and adults because we all tend to avoid people who are aggressive, annoying, extremely passive or violent. These are often children who are hard to like. Because they tend to get rejected or have few positive social interactions, they do not get as much opportunity to learn the social and emotional skills they need. If they also happen to have a more difficult time learning social skills in general, they can fall into a negative, downward cycle of inappropriate behavior.


What follows is a list and description of some of the most common skills that children will need to learn in order to **replace** their challenging behavior. They are not likely to give up grabbing, pushing, tantrums, or back-talk unless they have a new skill that works as well (or hopefully better) than the challenging behavior. There are many other resources available online, such as those from the [National Association of School Psychologists](http://www.nasps.org) to help with the specific skills listed here.

## Social Skills

- **How to get positive attention from the teacher.** The children we typically get along well with have learned ways to get our attention that are socially acceptable. They say “Good Morning!” They give us pictures they’ve drawn. They declare, “You’re the best teacher!” or “Can you look at what I did?” They have learned social graces that other children have not. We can teach these strategies directly to children who need them. Mini-lessons with modeling and practice work well. Puppets can be a great way to show the strategies in action. And be sure to give plenty of positive feedback when a child first uses any of the examples.



- **How to get positive attention from other children.** This is especially important for the child who is being reinforced by other children’s attention – typically the class clown who has few friends. Again using modeling and practice, teach the child skills such as:
  - How to say nice things to people
  - How to join a group at play by adding to the play theme
  - How to start a conversation
  - How to ask for something instead of grabbing
  - How to say “no” politely instead of pushing

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- **How to solve conflicts with others.** Teach the child alternatives to using aggression. These might be walking away to take a break, getting a teacher to help, or using words to express emotions, such as “I don’t like it when you say that!” or “Don’t touch my desk, I don’t like that!” The whole class can benefit from lessons and practice in problem solving steps that are readily available online.
  - **How to ask for a break.** Have a signal or teach the child what words to use to get a break. Allow the child a short break – getting a drink, standing and stretching, or taking a note to the office, and then teach the child how to get back to work immediately. Remember that children need breaks frequently and it is better to teach them how to do this appropriately than to have them remain off task, or to constantly reprimand them.
  - **How to ask for help.** During seatwork, or center time, teach the children a signal they can use to let you know they need help, instead of yelling, calling out, or acting out in physical ways. Many teachers use the rule, “Ask three, then me” in which children ask three other people for help before going to the teacher.


## Emotional Skills

- **How to calm down and handle frustration.** Life is inevitably frustrating, so learning how to handle these emotions is a critical life skill. Teach all children how to use focused breathing to calm down. Have a “Quiet Spot” in your classroom that children can use to get away from the group and compose themselves. Particular children might benefit from holding a favorite stuffed animal or blanket, or other attachment item to calm down. You can teach self-talk statements

such as “I’m okay. I can calm myself down” or “I can handle this even though I don’t like it.” Having a child watch the flecks settle in a snow globe can help her calm her breathing and body. The important point is that the child learns to eventually self-soothe rather than depend on an adult to help, but you will need to scaffold this a great deal until the child can learn to do it independently.



- **How to control one’s body.** Games that require stopping movements like *Simon Says* and *Mother May I* are excellent for teaching self-control. Games in which children wait for a hand motion to speak, or wait until the music stops to give the answer are also helpful. Remind the child to look at his own body to see where he is in space. Many children are completely unaware of their bodies unless attention is brought to them. Designate a line or other marker that shows concretely where a child’s personal space is during activities.
- **How to stay focused during group activities.** Teach the child how to track the speaker with her eyes, and what to do with her hands while she is listening. A fidget toy such as a squeeze ball, pipe cleaner, or playdo can help with controlling the body during group times. Use a visual reminder, such as a photo of what the body should look like for the child to hold and refer to. [Scripted stories](#) about specific situations like circle time can help children learn what behaviors are expected.

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- **How to stay focused during seatwork and how to take a quick break.** Teach the child how to work on just the first part of the assignment – perhaps one question, or even putting the name and heading on the paper. Then teach how to take a quick break – perhaps stretch in the chair, look around the room, or take a deep breath. Then go right back to work on a little bit more. The trick is to tackle the job in very small pieces and take a very small break frequently. Use visual reminders such as photos or printed cards with the behavioral expectations: stay in seat, work independently, or whatever your class expectations are.

- **How to wait for a turn.** Role play and plenty of practice can help children learn to wait. Teach them to use self-talk to distract themselves with phrases such as, “I can wait. I don’t need to have it right now,” or “I can find something else to do while I wait.” Have the child practice what she can do while waiting. Use visual reminders such as posting name cards for who gets the next turn, or who will be called on next.



You might feel overwhelmed by this list, thinking, “How could I find the time to teach all those skills?” First, start with only one or two of the skills and engage an assistant teacher to help if you have one. Second, remember how much time you are currently spending focusing on the challenging behavior. Take this same amount of time each day to focus on teaching one of these skills and in a few weeks, you should see improvement!





## STEP 4: CHANGE YOUR RESPONSE TO CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

We often reinforce the challenging behavior of children without realizing it. Look at the consequences for children's behavior and you will often see that they receive lots of attention and interaction from the teacher or the other children. There are two strategies to change this:

1. Respond in a way that makes the challenging behavior ineffective for the function it usually has.
2. Make sure the reinforcement for positive, alternative behaviors is better or more than the reinforcement for the challenging behavior.

This is easiest to explain in examples.

*In preschool Nathan chooses the sand table each day then throws sand at whomever is there with him. The teacher rushes over, reprimanding him loudly and forcible takes his arm and leads him across the room. She continues to lecture him, face-to-face, leaning in close to him. Next she sends Nathan to play in a different area.*

Nathan's teacher is reinforcing his behavior with her intense attention to it. In addition to using prevention strategies and teaching new skills, she needs to react differently – perhaps quickly and calmly sending Nathan to a different area without giving him much attention **and** giving him that same amount of attention when he is playing appropriately. Alternatively, she could go over to Nathan when he first starts working in the sand table, giving him plenty of attention, asking questions, discussing his work with the sand or other personal conversation **before** he throws the sand.

*In a first grade inclusion class, Latoya gets up out of her seat and runs to the door whenever the class starts seatwork. The teacher assistant catches her before she reaches the door, then Latoya throws herself on the floor, kicking her feet and yelling. Eventually the assistant takes*

*her to the Vice Principal's office where she waits to meet with him, eventually gets lectured, then returns to class.*



Clearly, Latoya is not only getting a lot of adult, one-on-one interaction, she is also escaping the seatwork she has trouble with. In addition to teaching her how to get started and stay focused on her work,

giving her choices, and providing visual reminders, the teachers also need to stop reinforcing the escape behavior through their reaction. When she tries to bolt from the room, the teacher can redirect her to the quiet spot to calm down for a minute or two, and get her back to work. She can remind her of the signal that was agreed on for a quick break, and give her lots of positive feedback and attention when she uses it. It may also be helpful to give her the intense attention **before** she tries to escape, even if it means praising her for putting her name on the paper.

*During calendar time in Kindergarten, Martin gets upset if he doesn't get a turn to put up the number for the day and lead the group in counting. He also has difficulty at other times during the day when he does not get to be the line leader, or to answer a question. He lies on the floor,*

*yelling from his frustration, and slides his body around on the floor to comfort himself. Eventually, he ends up playing with toys on the other side of the carpet. Although the teacher ignores him, the children pay plenty of attention to him, looking at him and talking to him. It creates chaos for the group activity.*



In addition to providing more time for children to socialize during the morning, the teacher can also teach Martin better ways of getting the children's attention. She can also teach him how to deal with frustration and calm himself down. Finally, she can change her reaction and stop him from getting the children's attention by directing him to the quiet corner until he calms down. Alternatively, she can give Martin plenty of positive feedback when he manages to tolerate not having a turn.

The important strategy here is to do something different than the way you typically react. If your prevention strategies and new skills are working well, you should have much less to react to. Above all, provide positive feedback constantly when the child is behaving appropriately. Children who have difficulty learning social and emotional behaviors need steady feedback in the beginning so that they know when they are doing things correctly and are meeting your expectations. Don't fall into the trap of assuming that they know they are doing well. Provide plenty of positive acknowledgements and you'll find a new, calmer environment is created.

## Staying Calm

Perhaps the most important aspect of your response is your demeanor and tone of voice. Strive to stay calm—no matter what! First, you are a role model, and you have an opportunity to model mature emotional responses. This is a teachable moment. Second, you want to avoid adding negative energy to a tense situation. By adding negativity, you can easily push a child who is agitated into a full blown melt-down or aggressive response.

It can help to remember that this outburst is not about you! It is about a child not having the coping skills to handle her challenges. Do not take it personally! Think of yourself like a firefighter.



There's no point in getting angry at the fire - you need to put it out as quickly as you can to minimize damage. You can't do this well if you are as agitated as the child. Also remember that children cannot learn new behaviors or concepts when their body is flooded with the flight-or-fight hormones. There's nothing to be gained in lecturing or trying to teach new skills until the child has calmed down.

Practice breathing techniques and body relaxation on a regular basis so you are prepared when you need to stay calm.



## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Now that you have learned these four steps, you can see that this process takes time, patience, and commitment. I hope that you will find that it is worth it, because you have the chance to help turn a child's life around with these strategies. And in the end, you will enjoy teaching more and be able to find the joy in your classroom!

For more information on using classroom management strategies to create a positive classroom, visit *The Positive Classroom* website at [www.thepositiveclassroom.org](http://www.thepositiveclassroom.org)





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR



Catherine Louise is a free-lance artist, award-winning sculptor, and writer. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and holds a B.A. in Art History and Sculpture from Rutgers University.