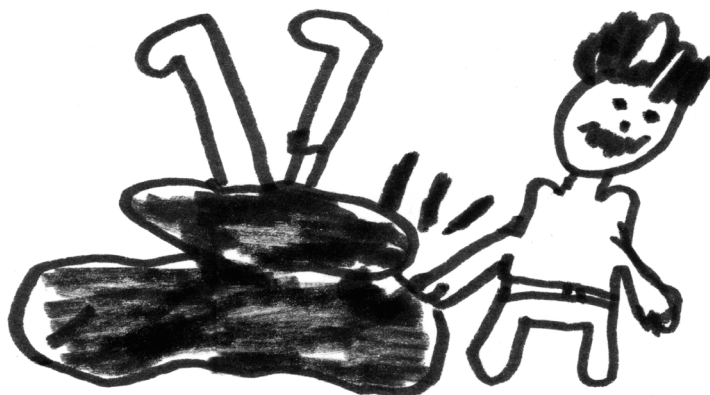


## CHAPTER 1

# What Is Challenging Behavior?



Challenging behavior is any behavior that

- interferes with a child's cognitive, social, or emotional development
- is harmful to the child, other children, or adults
- puts a child at high risk for later social problems or school failure (Klass, Guskin, & Thomas, 1995; McCabe & Frede, 2007)

This book focuses on aggressive behaviors because they have such a vast and dramatic impact on the children who use them, their peers, and you, the teacher.

*Aggressive behavior* aims to harm or injure others (Parke & Slaby, 1983). It can be *physical* or *verbal*; it can be *direct* (hitting, pushing, pinching, biting, grabbing, spitting, hair-pulling, threatening, name-calling) or *indirect* (spreading rumors, excluding others, betraying a trust). Because indirect aggressive behavior endangers relationships, social status, or self-esteem, it is sometimes called *social* or *relational aggression* (Vaillancourt, 2005).

Aggressive behavior often overlaps with *antisocial* or *disruptive behavior*, which inflicts "physical or mental harm or property loss or damage on others" (Loeber, 1985, p. 6) and violates social norms and expectations (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). It includes defying rules, instructions, or authority; arguing, swearing, cheating, lying, stealing, bullying, or destroying objects; and acting in ways that are

## War and Peace

**A**ggressive or antisocial behavior is not the same as conflict, which occurs when people have opposing goals or interests. Conflict can be resolved in many ways—by negotiating, taking turns, persuading, and so on—and learning to resolve conflict helps children to be assertive about their own needs, regulate their negative feelings, and understand others (Cords & Killen, 1998; Katz, Kramer, & Gottman, 1992). Aggressive behavior is just one tactic for dealing with conflict—in fact, some researchers consider it a mismanagement of conflict (Perry, Perry, & Kennedy, 1992; Shantz & Hartup, 1992). But most conflicts don't involve aggression.

abusive, coercive, or cruel. Many of the ideas and strategies in this book will also work with other types of challenging behavior—timid and withdrawn, for example.

We call these behaviors challenging because they are threatening, provocative, and stimulating, all at the same time. To begin with, they're challenging for the child. They put him in danger by preventing him from learning what he needs to know to get along with his peers and succeed in school. They're also challenging for him because he probably doesn't have much control over them. Even if he knows what to do instead—and chances are he doesn't—his ability to regulate his feelings and actions isn't yet up to the job. Improving matters will be an enormous challenge for him.

Challenging behavior is just as challenging for a child's family and teachers. In the face of this behavior, we often find ourselves at a loss. We can't figure out how to turn things around, make the situation tenable, or help him get back on track, behaving appropriately and feeling good about himself. But with the appropriate information and strategies, we can rise to this challenge and play a pivotal role in the development of a child with challenging behavior, helping him to avoid serious risk and blossom into the fully functioning person all children deserve to become.

## Is challenging behavior ever appropriate?

Infants and toddlers begin to use aggressive, impulsive behavior in the first year of life as they become angry or frustrated and interested in controlling their own activities and possessions (Hay, 2005). For them, challenging behavior is developmentally appropriate. In one study, most mothers reported that their toddlers grabbed, pushed, bit, hit, attacked, bullied, or were "cruel" by the time they turned 2 years old. In an interview, Richard E. Tremblay of the University of Montreal put it this way: "The question . . . we've been trying to answer for the past 30 years is how do children learn to aggress. But this is the wrong question. The right question is how do they learn not to aggress" (Holden, 2000, p. 581).

With the aid of families and teachers, most children gradually stop using physical aggression after about 3 years of age—although as their language skills grow, they may turn to verbal aggression instead (Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006). They learn to regulate their feelings, understand another person's point of view, and

## A Rose by Any Other Name

**C**hallenging is not the only label that adults have affixed to problem behaviors or the children who use them. Here are some others:

- High maintenance
- Antisocial
- High needs
- Bad
- Out of control
- Hard to manage
- Troublemaker
- Disruptive
- Aggressive
- Violent
- Impulsive
- Difficult
- Oppositional
- Noncompliant
- Mean
- A problem
- Attention seeking
- Willful

Labels are extremely powerful, which is why it's wiser not to use them—or if you do, to apply them to the behavior rather than the child. Employing language carefully makes a big difference in the way you see a child and think about what he can and cannot do. Negative labels can all too easily become self-fulfilling prophecies, preventing you from noticing the child's positive qualities and compelling you to lower your expectations of him. But when you can see a child in a positive light—as tenacious or persistent, rather than stubborn—he can see himself that way and act more positively, too.

utilize assertive and prosocial strategies to communicate their needs and achieve their goals. They are also increasingly able to delay gratification and decreasingly tolerant of other children's aggressive acts. By the time they enter kindergarten, most are relatively pacific and tend to remain so (Broidy et al., 2003).

All children continue to use challenging behavior once in a while when they're frustrated, angry, or having a bad day. Some even use it for an extended period when they're confronted with confusing and difficult events, such as a divorce, the arrival of a new sibling, a parent's illness or job loss, or a family move. But with extra support and understanding, they usually manage to cope.

## What happens to children with more serious behavior problems?

There are some children, however, who have much more difficult and persistent problems, and they may come to rely on challenging behavior as the best way to respond to a situation. For this estimated 3 to 17 percent, aggressive and antisocial behavior continues (Broidy et al., 2003; Côté, Vaillancourt, LeBlanc, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2006); and some children start down a road that eventually puts them at very high risk for a delinquent adolescence and a criminal adulthood. Researchers call this type of aggressive behavior "early-onset" or "life-course persistent" (Broidy et al., 2003; Campbell, 2002; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001). The longer a child utilizes this behavior, the harder it is to change his direction and the more worrisome its fallout becomes.

Children with behavior problems often find themselves rejected by their peers—disliked, ridiculed, excluded from play in child care and school, and not invited to birthday parties or other children’s homes. These experiences wound their self-esteem and self-confidence, leave them isolated and depressed, and deprive them of opportunities to develop and practice the social and emotional skills they desperately need. Instead they learn to expect rejection and may even discover that the best defense is a strong offense and strike out preemptively to protect themselves (Moffitt, 1997). Once rejected, a child will probably continue to be rejected and will have a hard time joining a new group (Campbell, 2002).

Behavior problems can lead to scholastic troubles, too. Because their social skills, emotional control, and language development are often below par, many children with challenging behavior aren’t prepared for the most basic task of their early school years, learning to read (Coie, 1996). It doesn’t help that their behavior may also be hyperactive, inattentive, and disruptive.

Teachers sometimes exacerbate the problem. They are more likely to punish children with challenging behavior and less likely to encourage them when they behave appropriately (Walker & Buckley, 1973); they call on them less frequently, ask them fewer questions, provide them with less information, and send them to the principal’s office more often, causing them to miss many hours of class time (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Not surprisingly, such children soon fall behind and are more likely to be suspended, expelled, held back, or tracked into special classes; they are also more likely to drop out (Kokko, Tremblay, Lacourse, Nagin, & Vitaro, 2006; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2004).

All of this primes children with challenging behavior to band together with their like-minded peers, raising their risk for delinquency, gang membership, substance abuse, and psychiatric illness. As adults, they find it harder to hold jobs or earn good wages, and they’re more likely to commit violent crimes (Broidy et al., 2003; Côté, Vaillancourt, Barker, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2007). Their marriages are rockier, the boys may become batterers, and the girls, who are at high risk for early pregnancy and single parenthood, lack parenting skills and may be mothering the next generation of children with behavior problems (Odgers et al., 2008; Serbin et al., 1998).



*Children who are rejected by their peers learn to expect rejection and may even discover that the best defense is a strong offense and strike out preemptively to protect themselves.*

## What do the theorists say about aggressive and antisocial behavior?

The theory that dominates the study of aggression today is the theory we have just described: the theory of *early-onset, life-course persistent aggressive behavior* (Dodge et al., 2006). Emerging from the new field of developmental psychopathology, this theory holds that aggressive and antisocial behavior is the result of the ongoing interaction between a child's genes, experiences, and culture, starting from conception. We will examine all of these elements in more depth in Chapters 2–6.

This developmental theory also builds on earlier theories, such as the *frustration-aggression theory*, which maintains that when people are frustrated—when they can't reach their goals—they become angry and hostile and act aggressively (Dodge et al., 2006); and *social learning theory* (Bandura, 1977), which is based on principles of conditioning and reinforcement and contends that people learn aggressive behavior from their environment. The father of social learning theory, psychologist Albert Bandura, argues that children observe and imitate the role models around them—family, teachers, peers, television. At the same time, they observe and experience the rewards, punishments, and emotional states associated with aggressive and antisocial behavior. When they see a behavior reinforced, they're likely to try it for themselves; and when they experience the reinforcement directly, they're likely to repeat it (Bandura, 1977). That is, when Zack hits Ben and gets the red fire engine, he will almost certainly try hitting the next time he wants something.

Social learning theory has spawned several sister theories that place more emphasis on cognition. According to the *cognitive script model*, advanced by L. Rowell Huesmann and Leonard D. Eron, children learn *scripts* or *schemas* for aggressive behavior—when to expect it, what to do, what it will feel like, what its results and consequences will be—and lay them down in their memory banks. The more they rehearse these scripts through observation, fantasy, and behavior, the more readily they spring to mind and govern behavior when the occasion arises (Dodge et al., 2006).

Psychologist Kenneth A. Dodge (2006) has proposed a *social information processing model* for aggressive and antisocial behavior. Every single social interaction provides a child with a mass of information to process and convert into a response. As each social cue comes in, he must encode it, interpret it, think of possible responses, evaluate them, and choose one to enact.

Most children learn at a young age that people usually have benign intentions and that situations rarely call for an aggressive response (Dodge, 2006). But children with very challenging behavior—perhaps because of their adverse life experiences—often lack the skills required to process incoming information properly, and they tend to see the world with a jaundiced eye (Dodge, 2006). When another child bumps into them in a situation most children regard as neutral, they think the other child did it on purpose—that is, they believe the child intended to hurt or be mean to them. Dodge calls this having a *hostile attributional bias*. Furthermore, they don't look for information that might help to solve a problem, and they have trouble thinking of alternative solutions. And because they don't anticipate what will happen if they respond aggressively, they often end up choosing passive or aggressive solutions that don't work (Dodge et al., 2006).

## Seeing Straight

Researchers Kenneth Dodge, John E. Bates, and Gregory S. Pettit (1990) wanted to find out whether physical abuse affects the way a child processes social information. They showed roughly 300 5-year-olds a series of cartoon vignettes depicting unpleasant events—a child's blocks get knocked over, a child tries to enter a group and fails, and so on. In some of the stories, the event is an accident, in some it is intentional, and in still others it is hard to tell.

When asked about the vignettes, children who had been physically abused gave different answers from children who were unharmed. Those who had been maltreated paid less attention to social cues, more readily attributed hostile intent to someone in the stories, and thought up fewer competent solutions to the problems the stories posed. Their teachers also rated their behavior as more aggressive.

The researchers concluded that the experience of being physically abused leads children to see the world as a hostile place and impairs their ability to process social information accurately.

This pattern, which becomes stable in middle childhood (Dodge, 2003), grows out of their experience. Children who are harshly disciplined at home or rejected by their peers feel angry and alienated and learn to defend themselves by becoming extra vigilant and quickly resorting to force (Dodge, 2003). Children who respond with indirect aggression may also have hostile attributional biases (Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002).

Other researchers distinguish between two different kinds of aggression. Children use *proactive aggression* (also called *instrumental aggression*) to achieve a goal such as obtaining a desired object or intimidating a peer. Proactive aggression is more common among very young children because they don't yet have the words they need to ask for a toy or the teacher's attention. They aren't angry or emotional; they're just using the means available to get what they want. Proactive aggression is governed by reinforcement and thrives in an environment that fosters the use of aggression to reach goals. It often leads to later delinquency and violence (Hay, 2005; Vitaro & Brendgen, 2005).

*Reactive aggression* (also known as *hostile* or *affective aggression*) appears in the heat of the moment in reaction to some frustration, perceived threat, or provocation (Dodge, 2006; Vitaro, Barker, Boivin, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2006). Angry, impulsive, and not at all controlled, it is often aimed at hurting someone. Children who are prone to reactive aggression may have an especially reactive temperament and live in a harsh environment (Vitaro & al., 2006). Because they also tend to make errors in social information processing, attributing hostile intentions to others in ambiguous or neutral situations, they are disliked by their peers (Vitaro & Brendgen, 2005).

Children who behave aggressively show some additional distinctive thought patterns. Aggression is perfectly acceptable in their minds. It doesn't hurt the guy on



*Children with challenging behavior believe that aggression pays off, and in their experience it often does.*

the receiving end, and it can enhance their reputation and make them feel good about themselves. Moreover, they believe that aggression pays off, and in their experience it often does (Vitaro & Brendgen, 2005).

Children who behave in an aggressive or antisocial manner may also lag behind in moral understanding. They can't see things from another person's perspective, insist on having their own way, blame others when things go wrong (Dodge et al., 2006), and continue to attack even when their target is clearly in pain (Perry et al., 1992). They may also inflate their self-esteem by overestimating their own popularity and social competence (Dodge et al., 2006).

Aggressive or antisocial behavior is more likely to occur if the environment considers it normal and acceptable and if it is part of a child's usual repertoire of responses (Brendgen, Vitaro, Boivin, Dionne, & Pérusse, 2006). When the environment devalues aggressive behavior and children have competent, effective, nonaggressive responses at their disposal, they have a far better chance of solving their problems amicably.

## Does culture play a role in aggressive behavior?

Cultures vary in the way they view aggressive behavior, highlighting the importance of learning. When adults actively discourage aggressive behavior, the outcome is a peaceful society such as that of the Amish or the Zuni Indian (Delgado, 1979). When they encourage it, an aggressive society is the result. Anthropologist D. P. Fry (1988) studied two neighboring villages in Southern Mexico. In La Paz, the inhabitants

## Roughing It

Teachers sometimes find it hard to distinguish between aggressive behavior and rough-and-tumble play, when children hit, chase, wrestle, and restrain one another for fun. Rough-and-tumble play is a normal activity, more common among boys, that once upon a time probably honed fighting skills and now helps children test themselves against others and learn to compromise, respect rules, and regulate aggression (Tremblay, Gervais, & Petitclerc, 2008). Rough-and-tumble play decreases with physical maturity. British expert Michael Boulton (1994) offers these tips on how to distinguish it from serious combat:

- *Facial and verbal expression.* In rough-and-tumble play children usually laugh and smile. When they fight for real, they frown, stare, grimace, cry, and get red in the face.
- *Outcome.* Children continue to play together after rough-and-tumble play, but after a real fight they separate.
- *Self-handicapping.* In a play fight, a stronger or older child may let his opponent pin or catch him. This doesn't happen in a serious fight.
- *Restraint.* In playful fighting, the contact between children is relatively gentle. When children are really fighting, they go all out.
- *Role reversals.* In rough-and-tumble play, children alternate roles—for example, they take turns chasing and being chased. This doesn't usually happen in a fight.
- *Number of partners.* Lots of children—10 or more—can participate in rough-and-tumble play. Usually just two fight when it's serious.
- *Onlookers.* Spectators aren't interested in play fighting, but a serious fight or bullying often draws a crowd.

frown on aggressive behavior, and there is very little of it. In nearby San Andres, the residents think aggressive behavior is normal, and when children throw rocks at each other, their parents don't intervene. The consequence is a homicide rate five times higher in San Andres than in La Paz.

A study of the behavior of children in six cultures—India, Okinawa, Kenya, Mexico, the Philippines, and the United States—found that, relatively speaking, American parents tolerate a fair amount of aggressive behavior among children (Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1990). The United States is one of the most violent countries in the industrialized world (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010). Just look at the homicide statistics: In 2008, the United States averaged 5.4 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009), compared with 1.8 for Canada (Statistics Canada, 2009). Homicide rates among American youth have been falling since the mid 1990s, but they are still alarmingly high (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). In 2007, 6 percent of high school students brought a gun to school (Eaton et al., 2008).



## Teacher's Choice

In *Preschool in Three Cultures*, Joseph Tobin, David Wu, and Dana Davidson (1989) vividly describe a Japanese 4-year-old who spends his preschool day fighting with the other children, ruining games, and loudly singing and joking. For the most part, his teacher ignores his behavior.

This is a deliberate choice. The Japanese teacher doesn't believe in confronting, censoring, excluding, or punishing. She believes children learn to control their behavior by interacting with their peers and that fighting among boys is inevitable, age-appropriate behavior that teaches children to deal with conflict and become more complete human beings.

The Chinese have a completely different perspective on aggressive behavior: They believe the teacher must intervene at once. "If you let a child behave that way in preschool," says one Chinese teacher, "he will think it is acceptable to be that way, and he will develop a bad character that may last his whole life." The responsibility for teaching appropriate behavior falls squarely on the teacher.

In the United States there is a third approach. Here, words solve the problem of aggressive behavior. Teacher and children talk about the rules and what each child wants, and little by little they negotiate a solution to their dilemma.

Although there are higher rates of violence among African Americans and Latino Americans than among European Americans (Kaufman, 2005), "ethnicity in and of itself should not be considered a causal or risk factor for violence," reports the American Psychological Association's Commission on Violence and Youth (Eron, Gentry, & Schlegel, 1994, p. 101). In these communities there is much more poverty, which is a significant risk factor for violence. When socioeconomic status is taken into account—along with community disorganization, joblessness, racism, and discrimination—the differences in violence rates are small.

There are no real differences in the rates of aggression between African American and European American elementary school children—or among young people ages 18 to 20 who are employed, married, or living with a partner (Dodge et al., 2006). This is an eloquent statement about intervention.

Regardless of their culture, race, or ethnicity, children need to feel safe, respected, and cared for to be able to learn. It's much more difficult to create the conditions that make learning possible when there's a child with challenging behavior in the classroom. The information in the following chapters will help you to understand challenging behavior as well as the children who use it. It will also enable you to develop the skills you need to prevent and manage challenging behavior effectively so that every child you teach can have the opportunity to learn and reach his potential.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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1. In the text of this chapter, we say, “Negative labels can all too easily become self-fulfilling prophecies.” Have you ever been labeled? How did the label affect your behavior and relationships? Can you think of situations when you have labeled someone else? Make a list of negative labels and find positive ways to say the same thing.
2. How can understanding the theories of aggressive and antisocial behavior help you to understand, prevent, and respond to a child’s challenging behavior? Choose one of the theories described on pages 11–13 and explain how it would affect your response.
3. How are a child’s life experiences related to the cognitive script and social information processing models of aggressive behavior?
4. “There are no real differences in the rates of aggression between African American and European American elementary school children—or among young people ages 18 to 20 who are employed, married, or living with a partner.” Why do we say this is an eloquent statement about intervention?
5. Why do you think the United States is so much more violent than other industrialized countries?

## SUGGESTED READING

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- Garbarino, J. (2000). *Lost boys: Why our sons turn violent and how we can save them*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.
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- Kagan, J. (1971). *Understanding children: Behavior, motives, and thought*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Newman, K. S. (2004). *Rampage: The social roots of school shootings*. New York: Basic Books.