



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

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To: Superintendents in Districts receiving UPK and/or SUFDPK Funding Prekindergarten (PreK);
Program District Contacts receiving UPK and/or SUFDPK Funding;
Direct Contract Agencies receiving SUFDPK Funding; and
Collaborating Agencies Program Contacts

From: Erik Sweet, Executive Director of the Office of Early Learning

Subject: Field Guidance for Promoting Positive Behavior and Addressing Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Prekindergarten Programs

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New York State's investment in pre-kindergarten programs is aimed at bolstering early childhood education and fostering positive development in young learners. This investment signifies a commitment to providing quality educational experiences that support children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth during their formative years.

The Office of Early Learning also recognizes the importance of addressing behavioral issues in early education settings. Efforts have been directed towards implementing strategies and interventions that promote positive behavior and minimize the need for exclusionary disciplinary practices¹. Recognizing the significance of explicit instruction of behavioral expectations, this guidance and attachments aim at equipping educators with effective tools, resources, and guidance to support children's behavioral needs proactively.

Behavior refers to how an individual conducts themselves, positively or negatively, in response to a situation or environment. How one behaves is influenced by various factors, including, but not limited to, abilities, disabilities, social identities (race, ethnicity, and gender, among others), cultural and familial experiences, interests, and languages². Young children let adults know their wants and needs through their behavior long before they have words. They provide adults "cues" to aid in understanding what they are trying to communicate. Some children need more help managing strong emotions or disruptive behaviors.

Young children thrive in well-organized learning environments with clear and simple expectations. New to the learning environment, teachers need to set children up for success. Children require explicit instruction and modeling of the expected behaviors for each environment they encounter, inside and outside (e.g., classroom, playground, library, bathroom), throughout their program day. When children understand what is

¹ [New York State Office of Student Support Services, Safe Schools Task Force Report: Recommendations for Reducing Disparities in and Reforming School Discipline in New York State, Dec. 2022, 1-71.](#)

² [National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations](#)



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expected of them, how to meet those expectations, and what actions are suitable, they are less likely to display a challenging behavior.

Challenging Behavior

Challenging behavior is defined as any repeated pattern of behavior, or perception of behavior, that interferes with or is at risk of interfering with optimal learning or engagement in social interactions with peers and adults.³ When a child exhibits intense actions, such as aggression towards others, refusal to comply, or tantrums, it is their way of communicating that they are struggling with something, whether it's a need, an emotion, or a challenge. As behavioral occurrences continue, it is not uncommon for adults to become so focused on managing the behaviors that they lose sight of the child's holistic development. Addressing children's challenging behavior is a complex process and is a shared responsibility of educators and families alike. When challenging behavior is not corrected, the effects can result in lost instructional time and lowered academic achievement. Additionally, educators may experience stress, frustration, and burnout. However, decades of research have indicated that exclusionary discipline practices are not only developmentally inappropriate but also ineffective in improving the child's behavior.

As the designers of learning, early educators should reflect on the function of the child's behavior and identify what environmental and/or instructional changes might need to be made to support this child. The following attachments provide information, guidance, strategies, resources, and frequently asked questions to build systems and practices that promote positive behavior in the PreK classroom. Some can be used immediately, while others can be used for planning purposes for the next program year.

- Getting Started: Six Tips for Supporting Positive Behaviors
- Building Relationships and Environments to Foster Positive Behavior in Prekindergarten: a Resource and Reflection Tool
- Prekindergarten Teacher Guidance for Challenging Behaviors
- Guidance for Supporting Positive Behaviors at Home

If you have any questions regarding the application or how to complete, please send an email to the OEL@nysed.gov mailbox with the subject as *Fostering Positive Behavior*.

³ [National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations](#)