

What Did My Child Do Now?

By Eleanor Reynolds

What do you do when your child's caregiver or teacher requests a conference to discuss your child's behavior? Dinah, the mother of an energetic three-year-old boy, received such a request. Immediately it crossed her mind that Jason had done something terrible. She tried to imagine what it could be. After reading a news report on the rising frequency of children being expelled from preschool and child care programs, Dinah was a little nervous. She really needed the child care provided by Jason's center and losing it would be a hardship for her family.

At the conference, Jason's teacher, Beckie, began by listing all of Jason's recent escapades: He hit other children, he got angry and threw toys, he called other children names, he failed to follow instructions and acted silly at circle time. Beckie presented the "bad behavior" list as if Jason was to blame, without describing the circumstances that came before each episode or including any other child's role in the episode. At the end of the conference, Beckie shrugged and told Dinah that Jason would have to improve because they had a waiting list of children wanting to enroll and couldn't tolerate a child with Jason's behavior problems. Dinah felt embarrassed and helpless. What could she possibly do to make Jason "behave?"

This example of a parent-teacher conference depicts some of the things that can go wrong when neither parents nor teachers are adequately prepared or skilled at communication or solving behavior problems. Dinah, the parent, knew that Jason could be a handful, so she

assumed he had behaved badly. Beckie, the teacher, had obviously not been trained to conduct a balanced and helpful conference. She poured out all the complaints that she and other teachers has been saving up. Following is another example, that of a productive and mutually satisfying meeting where parents and teachers worked as partners.

Dinah arrived at the meeting with Jason's father because she knew they would support each other. Beckie opened with some of Jason's strengths: He was a good friend, he was cheerful and compassionate, he told funny stories, and he was an expert block builder. She reassured Jason's parents that he was a normal, active, three-year-old boy. There were also some behaviors she was helping Jason improve. When another child had teased Jason, he hit the child. The teacher helped Jason tell the other child to stop teasing. Jason had trouble expressing frustration, so sometimes he threw toys. The teacher helped him find other activities instead of throwing toys. When Jason didn't seem to "hear" the teacher's instructions, she tried more physical ways: Getting down to his level, making eye contact, taking his hand, or showing him what to do and where to go. When Jason got silly and disrupted circle time, she gave him a choice of sitting out for a few minutes until he was ready to rejoin the group. At the end of the conference, Beckie repeated that these were normal behaviors for his age and most of these problems would

solve themselves within the group setting. Everyone left the conference feeling validated.

Tips for a Successful Parent-Teacher Conference

1. Bring the other parent or another relative with you for support, feedback, and strength.
2. Ask the teacher to describe your child's best qualities before she describes the problems.
3. State your own concerns about your child; they might be different from the teacher's concerns.
4. Ask the teacher to be specific about your child's problems. This avoids a lot of vague and petty complaining.
5. Ask what strategies the teachers use to set limits or help your child negotiate with other children.
6. If the teacher asks you to change your parenting strategies at home, be open-minded and cooperative, but also ask how it will actually improve your child's behavior during child care, then accept or reject her ideas.
7. If needed, ask the teacher for a referral for medical, psychological, or cognitive evaluation.
8. Thank the teacher for her concern and the extra time and effort she has contributed to have this meeting with you. She needs your support, too!

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The Quality Enhancement Project

The Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) is a new system of support for Child Care programs and families in Yolo County. It is a collaborative of different agencies and consultants that have come together to provide onsite resources, trainings and assistance. All of these services are available for FREE!

What the QEP offers Child Care Programs:

- Onsite trainings for staff and parents.
- The PLAY Van-a mobile lending library filled with toys, children's books, CD's, staff resource books.
- Access to grant funds to enhance your program.
- The Environment Rating Scales (ECERS/ITERS/FDCRS).
- Programmatic, classroom and child observations from Child Development Consultants.
- Access to the Inclusion Team-they can assist your program and families make accommodations and adaptations to help every child succeed!

What the QEP offers to Parents:

- Support to your child care provider-to promote continuous learning and enhancement of their skills.
- A stronger collaboration between parents and caregivers.
- Access to the Inclusion Team-they can assist you with accessing additional services, and collaborate with programs when developing accommodations and adaptations to help your child succeed!

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