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# Introduction

*“I have a student—a boy who gets very anxious when new activities are presented . . .”*

*“There’s this really bright girl in my class. She’s obviously very capable, but she gets off track so easily . . .”*

*“I don’t understand why last year he was such a good student, but this year . . .”*

*“My 5-year-old can be the sweetest kid, but recently he’s been hitting other kids at school . . .”*

*“She’s an active kid. I could understand that in September, but now . . . just when you’d think she would be more used to the classroom and the rules, she’s gotten more difficult.”*

*“She’s always been a conscientious student, but it seems like she just doesn’t care anymore . . .”*

*“It’s not like he doesn’t know it’s not okay. He knows he’ll get caught. He knows he’ll get into trouble, but he does it anyway . . .”*

*“Timeout just doesn’t work for him . . .”*

*“Timeout just doesn’t work for me . . .”*

*“My daughter is just great once she’s comfortable, but she takes so long to get comfortable . . .”*

*“He’s like an unpredictable time bomb—you never know when he’s going to go off . . .”*

*"If she could only keep her hands to herself . . ."*

*"She's the most disorganized student I've ever had . . ."*

*"She'll look you right in the eye, and lie . . ."*

*"There's something about this kid that just doesn't quite make sense. I'm not sure what it is, but I know there's something . . ."*

**H**ave you ever found yourself saying one—or more—of those statements or hearing one of them from a parent? If so, then you know what comes next: The Question. "What should I do if . . . ?" Or "What might work in order to change . . . ?" Or most likely, "How can I make that child stop?!" As a former preschool director and current early childhood education consultant and psychotherapist, I hear these questions with some frequency from teachers, parents, and other educators seeking feedback. Their hopes, their expectations, and possibly even their prayers are that I can give them "The Answer" to their problems. If only it were that simple!

The Question usually comes along with information. Sometimes it's short and sweet; other times it is quite involved. Some of the issues are classic child-raising or classroom issues. Some of the behaviors are terrifying. Some of the issues are rooted in cross-cultural conflicts. These concerned folks speak of problematic children, difficult children, challenging children, and the list goes on. The children they're asking about scare us with their behavior. They hurt other children. They make the classroom, playground, or home a chaotic place. They make us feel incompetent. They worry us with their possible futures. We feel their sadness and anxiety. And, either as teachers or parents, we are responsible for their success. Hopefully, we still love and care for them, despite the frustrations. Caring teachers and parents want to help every child to be a "good boy" or a "good girl." Such people ask me about the children they worry about. They want "The Answer."

Whether consulting, presenting, or practicing what I preach, my basic premise is this: If you pay attention to children, you will be better able to understand what motivates their behavior. This is particularly true for children who are unsuccessful in school, home, or neighborhood settings. If an answer does exist, it is that understanding helps us do a better job of guiding and shaping children's behavior in positive ways.

## The Real Question

The first question—the correct question to ask—is “What is the cause for this child’s behavior?” This book attempts to help educators discipline children properly and appropriately by getting them to observe and know their children before taking action. All children don’t act out in the same ways for the same reasons, and so one method of discipline cannot be applied across the board. Of course, some teachers and parents believe their theory works for *every* child in *every* situation. Maybe their method is to put all children who break rules in timeout; maybe a more loving teacher showers rule breakers with unconditional love. The reality is that one size doesn’t fit all.

You have picked up this book, and so it’s fair to assume that you’re looking for something more. This book doesn’t offer one answer that will work every time, but it does offer insight into why certain children behave in certain ways, and techniques and strategies for reacting appropriately and effectively to change those behaviors. This book encourages observation of the children playing under your nose, so that your interactions with them will be informed by who they are, not by what they do in the heat of the moment.

### Is Your Favorite Theory a Sound Theory?

Do you have a favorite theory that works with children who act out, challenge your authority, or cause some sort of disturbance in class? Do you have evidence that your theory works? What are your experiences with and observations of children who test your limits? If you have a favorite theory that often works, you will find that when you reexamine the evidence or facts, they will support the theory.

## From Observation to Theory to Strategy

Sound theories (as opposed to “favorite” theories) come from examining all the relevant information available. Your experience as an educator and your observations of the children in your center or school will help you formulate theories about your responses to their behavior. Let’s say you observe that a child behaves better in the mornings than in the afternoon—that’s data. The data may help you form a theory that the child misbehaves because he or she is tired. Another child who does much better working alone versus working in a small group may lead

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**EXPERIENCES AND  
OBSERVATIONS lead to THEORIES**

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you to theorize that his or her distractibility is the core issue. Yet another child who remembers one-part instructions but has trouble

### ***THEORIES lead to STRATEGIES***

with two- and three-part instructions may suggest to you a theory of a possible learning disability.

If your observations and experiences lead you to formulate particular theories, then the theories will also suggest particular strategies. Adults should consider ways to get the tired child more rest during the day. Teachers can look for ways to reduce distraction for the distractible child. Adults need to consider how to give instructions one part at a time to the child who has difficulty in that area.

## **From Strategy to Intervention**

Once we decide on a strategy, the implementation of it is the intervention. If we decide to give a child more rest, the intervention

### ***STRATEGIES lead to INTERVENTIONS***

may consist of extending the period of naptime for that child. The distractible child is reached by having him or her work at a corner table that does not face other children. Multiple-

part instructions are given to another child on a written list or with visual cues.

### **A Caution Against “Favorite Interventions”**

It is important to note that some people, instead of falling in love with a theory, fall in love with a particular intervention. They try to apply it to every situation. What happens when you fall in love with a hammer? Everything looks like a nail. Whack it. Whack that too! A hammer is a perfectly appropriate tool for hammering nails. However, it can be also used to drive screws into wood—though it may split the wood. A hammer can be used to crack open a walnut—but you might have the walnut shell and walnut fly all over the room. You can even use a hammer to turn off the television, but would you? Does it make sense?

All tools are great tools when they are used for what they are designed for. All tools can be used “creatively” with poor to great success. And all tools can be dangerous and harmful if used inappropriately. For some adults, the “hammer” of discipline they love might be restrictions. For others, it might be big hugs. For others, it might be rewards. Most discipline or behavior management tools or techniques can be effective, if used appropriately for the right situation. All discipline and management tools and techniques can be horrible

tools, if used inappropriately or arbitrarily. The challenge is to find the right tool for the particular behavior for the particular child.

### **Your Personal Style—Does It Help or Hurt?**

Theories, strategies, and interventions all originate with you. How do you decide the disciplinary action for one child as opposed to another? How do you implement an intervention? Your style is determined by your values, personal filters, perspectives, hang-ups, and other issues. For example, due to

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***INTERVENTIONS are moderated by your STYLE***

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assumptions about gender, a parent might spank the boys but not the girls. Another teacher may have “bad” children stand facing a wall as punishment because that is how bad behaviors were punished in his or her family. Our experience, our culture, and our habits can occasionally take precedence over logic in determining how we discipline, and we must be aware of and guard against this. If our disciplinary methods are too personally rooted, we not only jeopardize the opportunity to cultivate positive behavior, we risk the chance of scarring children emotionally and psychologically.

### **Results**

As you reflect on your personal style and how it affects your observations, the theories you formulate, and the strategies that make up your interventions, you increase your ability to bring about desired results. In looking at results, it’s important to keep in mind that there are two kinds: the immediate and the long-term. Immediately, we want to see that boundaries and limits are respected so that every child is safe. For the future, we want to bring about the growth and change of the children in our centers and classrooms.

**OBSERVATIONS → THEORIES → STRATEGIES →  
INTERVENTIONS → STYLE → RESULTS**

### **Answering the Question**

The previous paragraphs covered the basics of how to begin to answer those tough questions about behavior that I hear so often and that you probably play over again and again in your head. The following chapters in this book will provide you with the critical pathways in formulating informed, evidence-based solutions.

Realistically speaking, there will always be unexpected and unanticipated situations beyond what any book or training can cover. As a result, this book is a beginning and a wonderful reference tool. Though it doesn't give easy answers, it teaches and suggests ways to go about observing, theorizing, strategizing, intervening, perhaps adjusting your style, and getting results.

Learning and understanding fundamental principles and processes can offer a lot to adults as they support children. You know the old saying: Give someone a fish and that person will eat for the day. Teach someone how to fish, and that person will feed himself or herself forever. This book looks at relevant theories and processes, and how they play out in negative behavior. Remember the **OBSERVATIONS-to-RESULTS** process as you read this the book. Don't just look for the "hammer." This book examines goals of discipline, timeout, boundaries, reward/praise versus punishment, behavioral incentive programs, and ways to assess for and deal with underlying issues that may cause more problematic behavior. This will help you ask the questions that will lead to the answers you require.