

Special Needs in Daycare: Behavior Support

Prevent + Teach



What is the best first step for behavior management?

Start with prevention. Many challenging behaviors happen when a child is:

- confused about what to do
- overwhelmed by noise/crowds
- tired or hungry
- struggling with transitions
- unable to communicate needs



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What are prevention strategies that work in daycare?

Children feel safer when they know what comes next.

How to do it:

- Keep major parts of the day in the same order.
- Post a **picture schedule** at child level.
- Review it at arrival and before big transitions.

Example:

- “First breakfast, then centers, then outside.”
- Point to the pictures as you say it.

Clear expectations

Expectations should be short, positive, and taught with practice.

How to do it:

- Use 3 simple rules with pictures:
 - “Gentle hands”
 - “Walking feet”
 - “Inside voice”
- Practice during calm times (not during a meltdown).

Example:



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- Before centers: “Show me walking feet.”
- Praise: “Yes! Walking feet to blocks.”

Planned movement breaks

Movement helps many children regulate their bodies and attention.

How to do it:

Schedule breaks *before* the hard parts of the day.

Examples (1–2 minutes):

- wall push-ups
- animal walks to the bathroom line
- “jump 10 times then sit”
- carrying books to the shelf (heavy work)

When to place them:

- right before circle
- right before lining up
- right before cleanup

Fewer transitions when possible

Transitions are hard for many children. Reduce the number of “stop/start” moments.

How to do it:

- Combine steps: bathroom + wash hands + line up together
- Keep materials ready to reduce waiting



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- Use transition objects (a child holds a card/toy to carry)

Example:

Instead of: centers → cleanup → sit → wait → circle

Try: centers → cleanup song → straight to circle spot

What is an ABC chart?

ABC helps you understand patterns:

- **A (Antecedent):** what happened right before?
- **B (Behavior):** what did the child do?
- **C (Consequence):** what happened after?

Simple daycare ABC example

A: The teacher says “Clean up now” and the room is loud.

B: Child throws toys and screams.

C: Teacher cleans up for the child and moves them away from the area.

What ABC tells you:

The behavior may help the child **escape cleanup** or **escape noise**, or get adult help quickly.

What to write (keep it short)

- Time + activity
- What happened right before
- Exact behavior (no labels like “bad”)
- What adults did after
- What the child got/avoided (attention, item, escape, sensory)



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What is a replacement skill?

A replacement skill is what you teach the child to do **instead** of the behavior. It must: work faster than the problem behavior, be easy to do and meet the same need.

- **Hitting** → “Stop” + “Move away” + “Help please”
- **Throwing toys** → “Throw in basket” or “Ball only”
- **Running away** → “Hold hands” or “Stand on the stop spot”
- **Screaming** → “Break” card + “All done” sign
- **Biting** → “Chew tool” (if allowed) + “My turn” words

How do I teach replacement skills?

Teach during calm moments:

1. Model the words/sign/picture
2. Practice it like a game
3. Praise quickly: “You asked for help—great job!”

What do I do in the moment?

When behavior happens, your goal is **safety + calm** first.

In-the-moment steps

1. **Stay calm and get close** (be the child's calm)
2. **Use few words:** “Safe hands.” “Stop.” “Breathe.”
3. **Block/guide** to prevent injury
4. **Offer a safe choice:**



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- “Hands on your tummy or hands on the table.”
- “Sit on the rug or calm corner.”

5. Help the child regulate:

- deep breaths (model)
- squeeze hands together
- push the wall

6. After calm, teach the replacement skill

- “Next time, say ‘break.’ Let’s practice.”

What should I avoid in the moment?

- long explanations
- asking lots of questions
- arguing
- punishments that increase shame (especially during big feelings)



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