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WORK & FAMILY

By SUE SHELLNBARGER



What's Gotten Into Kids These Days?

January 17, 2008; Page D1

Glennette Scott was horrified when her daughter Brianna, 3 years old, started picking fights, throwing chairs and having emotional meltdowns in preschool. Anxious and upset, Ms. Scott searched the Internet and asked school officials for help with her daughter; she sometimes seemed like "a ticking time bomb," Ms. Scott says, because her outbursts were so sudden and unpredictable.



Tim Bower

With more individual guidance and one-on-one time from teachers, Brianna is learning to control herself, and she's progressing well now in her Falls Church, Va., kindergarten. But Ms. Scott still worries about her.

Behavior problems among preschoolers are emerging as a national issue. In several studies released in the past month, researchers at Yale, Rutgers and Cornell universities, among others, are treating preschoolers' conduct as a challenge that calls for changes in school programs and classroom management. The problem has reached the point where researchers are recommending preschool teachers have access to mental-health consultants, like the psychologists who help out in higher grades.

All 3- through 5-year-olds are sometimes stubborn and irrational, of course. Some of what's regarded as bad behavior may actually be normal. But some experts say they are increasingly seeing behavior that is out of synch with expected development, such as kindergartners who engage in frequent fighting, aggression, tantrums or a persistent inability to cooperate with others.

The causes aren't clear. Some experts blame a government drive for accountability in schools that is intensifying emphasis on early skill-building in reading and math, frustrating kids who aren't ready. Others cite a variety of other factors, including parents' early use of child-care centers, family instability, poor prenatal care or an increased incidence of such learning difficulties as attention-deficit disorder.

Whatever the cause, the pattern suggests children entering preschool need social and emotional skills now more than ever, not only to keep their own act together, but to deal with other kids. Indeed, the academic achievement that parents covet, and that schools are so avidly seeking, can't be attained without good social and emotional skills as a foundation.

There are no long-term data to measure the problem. A 1998 study of 17,219 kindergartners found 13% lacked the social and emotional skills needed to succeed in class. Separately, in a survey of 3,595 kindergarten teachers conducted around the same time, 20% to 30% said at least half their students lacked social skills or the ability to work in groups. Echoing a widely held view, Sara Rimm-Kaufman, an associate

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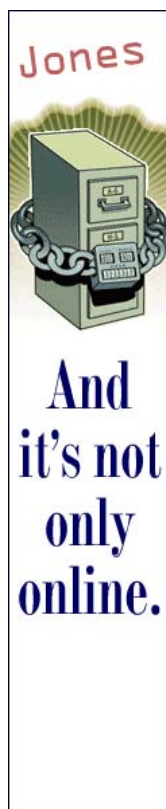
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professor of education at the University of Virginia and lead author of the second study, says she believes behavior problems among children entering kindergarten have risen since then.

Lisa McCabe, associate director of Cornell University's early childhood program, says she increasingly sees kids refuse teachers' and classmates' requests, bully others and behave destructively.

Experts' recommendations contain wisdom for parents:

Avoid pushing your children to read, write and do math too soon, at the expense of social and emotional skills. Learning isn't a race; each child's developmental path is unique.

Research shows children who are in over their heads in class act out their frustrations. Emily Clark, New York, was dismayed when her normally amiable toddler started biting other kids in child care. "I was beside myself," Ms. Clark says. "She's not bad, she's not malicious, she's not from an aggressive household." She soon realized that because her daughter was younger than her classmates, she lacked verbal skills to express frustration, so she acted it out. Now that her language has caught up, she's doing fine.

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In the classroom, preschoolers usually shouldn't be expected to sit for more than 10 to 15 minutes at a time listening to teacher-directed, structured activities, says Ellen Frede, co-director of Rutgers University's National Institute for Early Education Research, which issued a policy brief last month on solving behavior problems. Scripted, rigidly paced curriculum and drills also may frustrate

preschoolers.

Find classrooms well-equipped to handle behavior problems. Student-teacher ratios for 3- to 4-year-old children should be no more than 10 children per teacher, and teachers should have ample rest breaks, says a study released last week by Yale University's Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy. Such changes would reduce alarmingly high preschool expulsion rates, says Walter Gilliam, the center's director; previous research by the center found 6.7 preschoolers per 1,000 are expelled from school each year, three times the rate of expulsions in kindergarten through high school.

Teachers also benefit from access to mental-health or behavioral consultants, Dr. Gilliam says. In the case of Ms. Scott's daughter Brianna, teacher Anne Tapaszi says a behavioral consultant helped her teach Brianna to notice signs she was about to lose control, and either express herself in words or walk away. Brianna's improving social skills have freed her to make academic gains, including writing her name.

Consider delaying your child's entry to large-group care. Children who spend more time in child-care centers early in life show slightly more behavior problems in later years, compared with kids who have spent less time in centers. (They also show better pre-academic skills.) A 2007 study headed by Susanna Loeb, an associate professor of education at Stanford University, found the negative effects were greater among children who had entered child-care centers at earlier ages.

However, it's wrong to place all the blame on child care. Its behavioral effects are very small; family factors, such as parents' income and education, have a far bigger impact, says James Griffin, director of the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development's early learning program. Only about 24% of U.S. children are enrolled in child-care centers, down from a 20-year high of 30% in 1993, federal data show.

Also, while large-group care is linked to behavior problems, it also can be a cure. Preschool is an excellent place to socialize children and teach them to control their behavior, Ms. Frede says. San Francisco attorney Rebecca Eisenberg, whose daughter, 4, and son, 2, have attended high-quality child-care centers, believes the experience has taught them to be cooperative and compassionate. When her daughter noticed at a party that a two-year-old child was sniffing alone in a corner, feeling left out, she hugged and comforted her, saying, "It's OK," Ms. Eisenberg says.

Reduce children's stress. Researchers don't know exactly how group care shapes behavior, but one factor may be stress. Day-care children show increases in the stress hormone cortisol throughout the day, compared with children at home, says a 2006 study in the journal *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*. Long-term effects, if any, aren't known, but Ms. McCabe and others are exploring classroom stress-reduction techniques, including relaxation exercises.

Prepare your child to control his or her own behavior, even when other children don't. Cathy Proctor was shocked when her two preschoolers came home from their child-care center calling each other "butt-head" and wanting new toys she dislikes, such as Power Rangers. But the Denver mother liked other things they were learning, such as following directions. So she sat them down for a talk about "where the line is" on behavior: Regardless of other families' standards, she said, their family's rules would remain firm and unchanging. The name-calling stopped, she says, and no other problem "me-too" behaviors have cropped up.

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