Using a Child's Preferences

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What Is It?

Using a child's preferences is a universal and an individual antecedent strategy to prevent challenging behavior from developing or occurring. Adults use a child's preference when they incorporate things the child likes into class or individual experiences. Incorporating a child's preferences can increase engagement and enjoyment for children and adults and supports a child's active participation in learning. Preferences can include objects, people, and activities. Preferences can also help distract children from unpleasant - but necessary - activities, such as waiting for the bus or brushing teeth.

When to Use It

- As a curriculum modification to promote child interest and engagement in learning activities.

- When a child is engaging in challenging behavior to avoid a specific routine or activity, incorporating the child's preferences may promote participation and reduce challenging behavior.

	Steps to Implementation / How to Do It
☐	1. Ensure children's interests are incorporated across the program day (see "Using Children's Interests in the Classroom" intervention guide).
☐	2. Assess the cultural, developmental, and individual appropriateness of the target activities if children's interests are incorporated but a child engages in challenging behavior during specific activities. Make changes to simplify, change, or remove problematic routines and activities.
☐	3. Determine if the child could engage in the difficult activity while interacting with a preferred item (after confirming changes to target routines or activities to ensure they are developmentally, culturally, and individually appropriate). For example, an individual could wait in a line (where challenging behavior occurs) while listening to their favorite music (a possible interest).
☐	4. Select preferred objects or activities that do not interfere with the target activity (e.g., playing with a fidget toy or stress ball during circle time).
☐	5. Engage the child with the preferred item or activity prior to asking the child to engage in the target activity.
☐	6. Monitor the child's progress related to challenging behavior and engagement in the activity and make changes as necessary.

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Example

Ms. Flores embeds children's interests into her preschool class to facilitate learning opportunities. Ms. Flores' class is currently interested in the construction site across the street, and so she has been using construction themes throughout the day.

Henry is a 5-year-old who loves construction. Even though Ms. Flores starts the day with a construction activity, Henry often engages in challenging behavior when transitioning from the bus to the classroom. He refuses to line up with his peers and hides behind the corner of the building to avoid coming inside. First, Ms. Flores analyzes the transition and determines she could make a few minor changes to decrease the amount of time all children spend waiting in line. Although it decreases the frequency with which Henry runs away, it's still a dangerous enough behavior that Ms. Flores requests help from the behavior coach. The behavior coach conducts a functional assessment and determines that Henry engages in challenging behavior to avoid the transition to classroom activities and tasks. The coach and Ms. Flores decide to implement preferred activities to increase Henry's safe behavior during the necessary transition.

Ms. Flores has noted that Henry is interested in construction and classroom jobs. She brainstorms several jobs that incorporate the construction theme and assigns one to Henry during the morning arrival transition. Some days, Ms. Flores asks Henry to be the classroom "foreman" by leading his classmates inside or carrying the classroom attendance clipboard. Other days, Ms. Flores asks Henry to go to the classroom early to assist with "inspecting" and "fixing" the building along the way. Henry engages in these activities while transitioning to the classroom. After several days, she notices Henry no longer demonstrates challenging behavior during the transition.

How to Increase Effectiveness

- Ensure the target activity and preferred items can occur together.

- Identify several preferred items or activities. Use new items and vary them to increase the value and novelty of each item. If a child becomes disinterested in an item or activity, select different items to incorporate.

- When the child successfully engages in the target activity across multiple opportunities, gradually decrease use of the preferred item. Don't fade too quickly!

- Remember: Present the preferred item before the child engages in challenging behavior; otherwise, the challenging behavior could be reinforced inadvertently.

- To provide universal support, see the "Using Children's Interests in the Classroom" intervention guide.

Resources

Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (n.d.). Child preferences.

Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (n.d.). Following children's lead.

Dunlap, G., & Liso, D. (2004). Using choice and preference to promote improved behavior.