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In It for the Long Haul: Parent–Teacher Partnerships for Addressing Preschool Children's Challenging Behaviors

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Abstract

The *Getting Ready* intervention aims to strengthen parent–teacher partnerships to promote positive child outcomes. This study focused on the team process and social validity of the intervention when young children displayed challenging behaviors. Qualitative analysis yielded seven themes that provided a rich description of the preschool experiences of four children, their parents, and the preschool teachers and Early Intervention (EI) coaches serving them. Parent–professional partnerships, positive parent–child interactions, and team members' engagement in collaborative problem solving and planning were reported. The social validity of the *Getting Ready* intervention was confirmed by participants valuing the academic and behavioral goals established for children, the parents' partnerships with teachers to address chronic behavioral challenges, and reports of the durability of intervention impacts as three children completed kindergarten.

Keywords

partnerships with professionals, parents, families, challenging behaviors, intervention strategies, at risk of developmental delays/disabilities, disability populations, qualitative investigations, research methodologies

It has been estimated that for preschoolers living in poverty, the prevalence rate of challenging behaviors approaches 30% (Qi & Kaiser, 2003). Challenging behavior in young children has been defined as repeated patterns of behavior that interfere with or risk interfering with children's optimal learning or pro-social interactions (Smith & Fox, 2003). If not addressed in children's early years, these issues tend to persist into later childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Early challenging behaviors have been associated with or found to predict peer rejection (Wood, Cowan, & Baker, 2002), academic problems (McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006; Raver & Knitzer, 2002), delinquency and substance abuse (Campbell, 1995), and poor mental health (Pierce, Ewing, & Campbell, 1999).

The skills of adults who have these children in their care are often tested when confronted with children's challenging behaviors. Families report pervasive impacts on their routines, activities, family roles, and members' emotional well-being (Fox, Vaughn, Wyatte, & Dunlap, 2002). In addition, representatives of the workforce in early education settings often lack essential expertise needed to prevent or intervene in children's challenging behavior (Hemmeter, Santos, & Ostrosky, 2008). They also tend to lack consultative skills for conveying effective interventions to families to promote consistent implementation of strategies across home and school environments (McWilliam, 2010). Both publicly and privately operated preschools are expelling children with behavioral concerns at alarming rates, resulting in the children having fewer opportunities than their typical peers to learn the basic pre-academic skills and social competencies that are crucial for school success (Gilliam, 2005; Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

Parents and teachers of young children with challenging behaviors need to form effective partnerships to stem this tide of negative cascading events. High-quality parent–teacher relationships nurtured within a framework focused on collaboration and joint problem solving would allow parents and teachers to operate as a team to anticipate, prevent, or address children's challenging behaviors, and support children's positive social, emotional, and behavioral development across home and school environments.

Positive parent–teacher relationships are characterized by regular, constructive communication, mutual respect, high levels of trust, and collaborative, family-centered practices (Dunst, Boyd, Trivette, & Hamby, 2002; Turnbull,

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Table 1. *Getting Ready* Model Intervention Strategies.

Establish parent–child and parent–professional relationship
Establish a context for positive parent–child interaction
Use relationship-building communication strategies (e.g., active listening, asking open-ended questions, requesting parent opinions, affirming parent competence)
Share observations/knowledge of child over time
Exchange observations of child's developmental progress
Focus parent attention on child's strengths, needs, interests, and activities
Affirm parent insights and competent observations
Identify mutually agreed upon developmental expectations for child
Engage in open discussions of family and program goals for the child's development
Share developmentally appropriate information as needed
Collaboratively identify appropriate developmental goals for child
Share ideas and brainstorm methods for helping child meet expectations
Discuss contexts that best elicit and support child's growth
Assist parent to identify everyday opportunities for child that support development
Identify current and potential parent behaviors that can support targeted learning
Suggest appropriate activities and model adult behaviors that scaffold child learning
Observe parent–child interactions and provide feedback
Provide parent opportunities to practice interactions and skills with the child
Provide parental validation and affirmation as parent–child interactions are observed
Identify current strengths related to developmental expectations
Monitor the child's skill development and determine directions for continued growth
Engage parent in noting child's progress and measuring progression toward goals
Using data, discuss needed adjustments in interactions and/or learning opportunities
Cycle to new developmental expectations and learning opportunities as needed

Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011). Indeed, such collaborative partnerships have been linked with improved behavioral and social–emotional outcomes for children (Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird, & Kupzyk, 2010). Thus, interventions that focus on strengthening parent–teacher relationships will be particularly salient for the population of children with challenging behaviors.

While necessary, such relationships are not entirely sufficient for creating an environment in which parents and teachers can become collaborative partners in addressing children's concerns. Further steps must be taken for effective joint problem solving and planning to occur. These steps include identifying children's learning or behavioral targets that are shared priorities, recognizing potential learning opportunities and supports across home and school routines, generating interventions that are evidence-based and responsive to families' values and cultural beliefs, and designing practical methods for monitoring children's progress and evaluating chosen interventions (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006; Knoche, Cline, & Marvin, 2012; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008).

Getting Ready: A Parent–Teacher Partnership Model

The *Getting Ready* intervention is an ecological, family-centered, collaborative, and research-based model (Sheridan, Marvin, Knoche, & Edwards, 2008) that integrates two key approaches to promote positive outcomes for children and their families (see Table 1). First, triadic coaching strategies (McCollum & Yates, 1994) support positive teacher–parent–child interactions and encourage parent engagement in promoting children's learning and development. Second, a process of collaborative problem solving and planning by parents, preschool teachers, and Early Intervention (EI) coaches is used to identify desired outcomes for children, plan behavioral strategies to attain those outcomes, implement plans, and formulate data-based decisions about the effectiveness of the strategies (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008). Thus, this model of intervention offers parents and preschool teachers a systematic approach for sharing responsibility for fostering developmental success in children.

Studies of Getting Ready *to Date*

Studies of the *Getting Ready* model of intervention have demonstrated improvements in a host of outcomes such as social–emotional competencies, language use, and early literacy skills for preschoolers, as well as parent–child interactions for parents of infants and toddlers (Knoche, Sheridan, et al., 2012; Sheridan et al., 2010; Sheridan, Knoche, Kupzyk, Edwards, & Marvin, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2014). Specific analyses, however, have not been conducted for the children with challenging behaviors; the needs and experiences of this group of children, their teachers and families might be unique. Further exploration of the

intervention for children with challenging behaviors is, therefore, warranted.

Gathering information about *Getting Ready* participants' experiences with the intervention could provide a description of the process and an opportunity to explore the social validity of the intervention (Strain, Barton, & Dunlap, 2012), particularly for parents and teachers of children with challenging behaviors. Understanding these perspectives could inform those engaged in educational and social support of such children.

Qualitative Approaches to EI Research

Researchers across disciplines that study young, vulnerable children, and their families (e.g., allied health professions, child welfare, mental health, early childhood education, and EI) have used qualitative methodologies to better understand a variety of topics including family access to services and supports (Podvey, Hinojosa, & Koenig, 2010), impacts of children's challenging behaviors upon adults (Branson & Demchak, 2011), and qualities of family-centered practices (Pighini, Goelman, Buchanan, Schonert-Reichl, & Brynelsen, 2014).

Respected qualitative studies utilize rigorous, systematic standards for collecting and analyzing data in efforts to understand the "meaning" people ascribe to their shared experiences. Key characteristics of qualitative research include (a) a focus on meaning; (b) a role for the researcher as the primary instrument for both data collection and analysis; (c) use of an inductive process that moves from data to concepts, themes, and theories; and (d) resultant products that offer a rich description of the participants' lived experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to provide an in-depth, qualitative examination of the *Getting Ready* intervention for a vulnerable population of young children, specifically those with challenging behaviors. The researchers aimed to construct a rich, composite description of "what" parents, teachers, and EI coaches experienced in the collaborative partnership process as well as "how" it was experienced, in an effort to ascertain the practical utility and meaningfulness of the *Getting Ready* intervention for these participants (Moustakas, 1994).

The study addressed the following questions:

1. What process did various teams of parents, preschool teachers, and EI coaches use to address their individual and collective needs related to interactions with children with challenging behaviors?
2. How did the parents, preschool teachers, and EI coaches of the children with challenging behaviors describe the *Getting Ready* intervention in terms of its social validity (e.g., importance of intervention targets, ease of implementation of strategies, effectiveness of the strategies, and enduring impacts of their participation in this process)?

Method

Reflexivity of the Researchers

All three authors are interested in the phenomena of parent–teacher partnerships for improving child outcomes. The first and second authors have experience as early interventionists in the fields of special education as school psychologist and speech/language pathologist, respectively. The third author has experience as a developmental psychologist and researcher.

Philosophically, the *Getting Ready* model seemed to provide an interesting framework for approaching parent–teacher partnerships that might be particularly useful in cases of challenging child behavior. Rather than considering the children "dysfunctional," parents, preschool teachers, and EI coaches were prompted to collaborate in reciprocal relationships to solve the challenges. The researchers' past personal experiences with similar parents and preschool teachers were set aside or "bracketed" (Moustakas, 1994) so that the voices of these participants could emerge.

Setting and Participants

This study focused on a subset of participants from a multiyear project investigating the impacts of the *Getting Ready* intervention for a sample of preschool children in rural and urban areas of a Midwestern state. Preschoolers attending Head Start or state-funded pre-kindergarten programs were initially screened and identified for participation in the project if they obtained standard scores of 90 or below on norm-referenced measures of pre-academic, language, and/or social–emotional skills. The subset under investigation for the present study consisted of 45 children (26 males; 19 females; *M* age = 3.8 years) assigned to the treatment group of the first cohort of children enrolled in the larger project. Nineteen children from this group were selected using criteria specified below. The *Getting Ready* intervention was implemented with and data collected from the 19 children, their parents, and preschool teachers during Year 1 while the children attended preschool. Due to attrition of families and/or teachers, only four of the children continued to participate in the intervention during a second year of preschool. Near the end of Year 2, interviews were conducted with these four children's parents, preschool teachers, and EI coaches. In addition, archival qualitative data from Year 1 were analyzed for these four children. As the children transitioned into

kindergarten, one child moved and discontinued participation in the project. Thus, follow-up interviews in the spring were conducted with parents of the remaining three children who attended kindergarten in Year 3. No data from control group participants were used in the present study.

Selection criteria. The researchers accessed de-identified project data from Year 1 for the 45 children and calculated percentile scores for the parent and teacher versions of the Problem Behaviors domain of the Social Skills Improvement System–Rating Scales (SSIS-R; Gresham & Elliott, 2008). Children whose scores fell at or above the 75th percentile on either version of this measure were selected for the present study as their scores indicated a frequency, intensity, and/or duration of challenging behaviors greater than 75% of their peers. Nineteen children (13 males; 6 females; *M* age = 3.9 years) were thus identified. Of the 19 children, 53% identified as Caucasian, 37% as bi- or multiracial, 5% as Black, and 5% as Native American. English was reported as the primary home language for 95% of the children, and Spanish was reported for 5%. The children were served by one of 11 preschool teachers. The teachers (*M* age = 36.3 years) had an average of 9.4 years of experience teaching children ages birth to 5, and they worked with one of three EI coaches assigned to support their efforts to implement the intervention.

From the 19 identified children, four cases were purposively selected for in-depth qualitative study because the families, teachers, and EI coaches had (a) a complete set of data from Year 1 participation in the larger project, and (b) agreed to continue into project Year 2. This assured all had a similar length of experience with the *Getting Ready* intervention and were available for participation in the ongoing qualitative study. These four children (two boys and two girls) were enrolled in the project at the age of 3 years and were eligible for 2 years of preschool. Three of the children identified as Caucasian, one as biracial. Follow-up interviews were conducted at the end of Year 3 for three of the four cases, as one child's family moved out of the community and was no longer available for an interview.

Procedure

Intervention—Getting Ready. Preschool teachers in the treatment group received an initial 2-day training on essential *Getting Ready* strategies (see Table 1), and ongoing professional development twice monthly from a project-supported EI coach. Teachers were expected to utilize the strategies during team meetings with parents, such as the required two parent–teacher conferences and four home visits throughout the school year, as well as during other casual family contacts, such as school pick-up and drop-off times.

The EI coaches, assigned to provide ongoing support to teachers in their use of *Getting Ready* strategies, were highly qualified, experienced early childhood professionals. Members of the research team provided EI coaches 5 days of initial training as well as ongoing support for implementation of the *Getting Ready* model and promoting adult learning through coaching (Rush, Shelden, & Hanft, 2003). EI coaches observed in each teacher's classroom 8 hr per month and facilitated collaborative goal selection, problem solving, and intervention planning and monitoring during team meetings with parents and preschool teachers. During these team meetings, parents and teachers aimed to use data-based, shared decision-making strategies to address children's learning or behavioral challenges. Thus, in addition to the typical educational, parenting, and social supports provided by participation in the preschool programs, parents and children in the treatment group received an added value—the *Getting Ready* intervention.

Data collection and analyses. A four-step iterative approach was used to collect and analyze several sources of data: team documents, audio-recordings, and participant interviews.

Step 1. Documents completed by parents, teachers, and EI coaches during collaborative meetings held in Year 1 (e.g., parent/teacher conferences, home visits) noted meeting events and described home-school plans for particular child outcomes. In addition, audio-recordings from the parent–teacher conferences of Year 1 were selected for this analysis. The first author read through collected documents and jotted down preliminary observations for future analytic consideration directly in the margins (Saldaña, 2013). Next, a coding protocol adapted with permission from Stake (2006) was used while reviewing each document and audio-recording to enable systematic recording of specific data units gleaned from all sources of information. Several questions were used throughout the review of artifacts to guide the collection of impressions, concepts, and/or quotes (e.g., What were team members trying to accomplish and how? How did team members characterize this process? What does one learn about the process and participants' experiences from these artifacts? Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Step 2. At the completion of Year 2, one-on-one interviews were scheduled with individual parents, preschool teachers, and EI coaches for four cases. Nine participants were interviewed: four parents, three preschool teachers (one teacher taught two of the children), and two EI coaches (one coach supported three of the children's teams and another supported one child's team). Interview protocols were developed to standardize and guide data collection. Interviews lasted 30 to 40 min, and were completed over the course of 1 month. The first author took notes during the interviews, and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The same procedures described above were utilized to conduct follow-up interviews with three

Table 2. Identified Themes and Associated Codes From a Qualitative Examination of the *Getting Ready* Intervention for Young Children With Challenging Behaviors.

The *Getting Ready* intervention team process	
Themes	Codes
Establishing and nurturing parent–teacher partnerships	Shift in team members' roles Addressing greater adult concerns
Positive parent–child interactions	Nurturing, teaching, and positive reinforcement Appropriate limit setting More parent contacts needed
Collaborative problem solving and planning	Engaging in the process Convergence in goal selection
Collecting data to make decisions	Value of data to inform team decisions Challenges of data collection
The social validity of the *Getting Ready* intervention	
Themes	Codes
Academic and behavioral goals are valued	Selected academic and behavioral goals Behavioral goals prioritized
Chronicity of young children's challenging behaviors	Evidence-based strategies Inconsistent response to intervention Incremental, functional improvements
Durable impacts of the intervention for children, parents, and teachers	Growth of children in preschool and beyond Changes in parent interactions Teachers embrace partnerships

available parents at the end of Year 3, when the children had nearly completed kindergarten.

Step 3. Coding protocols for the reviewed artifacts and transcriptions of audio-recorded interviews were uploaded to MAXQDA (Kuckartz, 2007) software for data storage and organization, ease of coding, and thematic development. A constant comparative method of analysis was performed by the first author (Merriam, 2009). In an iterative and inductive fashion, the texts were read, meaningful segments of text identified, and segments labeled with initial codes. Categories of codes were then aggregated to identify patterns or themes. Connections between themes were noted. This resulted in a thick, rich description of the participants' experiences with the *Getting Ready* intervention process as well as naturalistic generalizations of "what was learned" (Creswell, 2013, p. 191).

Step 4. Multiple validation strategies were used to gauge the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). First, a peer review of the coding process was conducted. The second author, who has expertise in preschool education and interventions, examined the segments of text and found the codes assigned to segments, as well as the placement of codes into subsequent themes, to be reasonable. Second, the various data sources including documents, audio-recordings, and face-to-face interviews were examined by the research team for triangulation, that is, corroboration of themes (Creswell, 2013). Finally, after a description of participants' lived experiences was developed, all interview participants were invited to review a written summary of the findings and conclusions. This member check resulted in six participants (two parents, two teachers, and two EI coaches) providing feedback to the researchers. This feedback was used to revise the description of participants' experiences.

Results

Four key themes emerged that describe the process used by the children's teams to address their needs around interacting with and teaching children with challenging behaviors. In addition, three major themes emerged that convey the social validity of the intervention from the perspective of these participants. Table 2 shows each theme and its respective codes.

The Getting Ready *Intervention Team Process*

Foundational principles of the *Getting Ready* model of intervention were clearly reflected in data collected from the team members. Four themes emerged demonstrating that (a) parent–teacher partnerships were established and nurtured, (b) most parents gained competence over time for interacting positively with their children, (c) teams utilized collaborative problem solving and planning to address prioritized

concerns for these children, and (d) teams engaged in collecting data for purposes of making decisions.

Establishing and nurturing parent–teacher partnerships. The *Getting Ready* process required participants to *shift* from what had been perhaps more comfortable roles as givers of information about children (teachers) and receivers of information (parents) to egalitarian roles as partners. Teachers made efforts to foster partnerships with parents by noticing and affirming parents' interactions with their children, asking open-ended questions to engage parents in dialogue, and "trading ideas about what would and wouldn't work" in terms of strategies chosen to help children achieve desired outcomes that had been mutually identified by the team. A coach stated, "I like the way it really did create a partnership between the parent and the teacher to solve problems." One parent reported feeling "connected" to the professionals on her child's team. Another stated that she and the teacher had "mutual respect" for each other. Parents were encouraged to share their perspectives regarding their children's strengths, developmental and behavioral needs, preferences, and interests. This yielded a powerful store of knowledge to assist teams with designing strategies to address children's needs and planning for successful implementation of strategies. One teacher shared, "I've come to know this mom a lot better. I know what she does, how she handles her son, and the way that she works with him at home."

Efforts to establish and nurture effective partnerships, however, were not without some challenges. EI coaches and teachers reported instances when parents seemed introverted or hard to read, had difficulty verbalizing their thoughts about their children, or expressed negative views of their children. At times, valuable meeting time was utilized to address *adult concerns*, such as food insecurity, job loss, or health issues that were more pressing to the parents at that time than the children's educational needs. One EI coach reported, "We spent time processing the challenges that mom was undergoing with many, many issues. And so one of our primary challenges in the visits was . . . trying to get it focused on the child."

Positive parent–child interactions. Teachers were trained for this project and encouraged by EI coaches to utilize a set of strategies designed to promote positive, development-instigating parent–child interactions. There was evidence that these efforts paid off in important ways for all of the families studied. First, parents reported focusing more attention on *nurturing, teaching*, and *positively reinforcing* their children. Parents spoke of giving their children more one-on-one attention and planning enjoyable free-time activities to do together such as going to the park, playing games, or watching a movie. Parents said this about their interactions with the children: "I play with him and talk with him." "When he goes to bed at night . . . I read books to him." An EI coach commented on one child's mother: "She wasn't afraid to get down on the floor with her (daughter)." Parents reportedly gained a better understanding of how their children learn best. One parent shared that participating in the *Getting Ready* project was valuable because her son was a different sort of learner than her other children. She said, "This was more of an opportunity to learn because [my son] didn't want to learn. He didn't want me to help him . . . So . . . this . . . shows me or teaches me what I need to do differently." Another mother shared, "I think it helps with me understanding my child more." In addition, all parents agreed to use social reinforcement, such as praise or high fives, when children followed directions and displayed other positive behaviors.

Second, parents gained skills in *setting appropriate limits* for their children's behavior. One mother stated, "A lot of it was me realizing I need to be the parent. He's got to know if I say it, then I need to follow through with what I say, and that's what's going to happen." The EI coach corroborated this parent's report of her change in approach to setting limits. The coach remarked that the parent ". . . followed through to make sure that she helped him do that [comply with her direction] if he didn't do it [on his own]." The coach observed that the parent's more effective follow-through in setting limits resulted in improved child behavior.

Despite this progress, teachers and EI coaches felt they needed *more contacts* than the program-required two parent–teacher conferences and four home visits each year with two of the families to provide an adequate amount of support for change in the quality of parent–child interactions and children's behaviors. They felt they had limited opportunities during meetings with these parents to directly observe and encourage positive parent–child interactions, or affirm strategies used to prevent challenging behaviors. Furthermore, these families demonstrated patterns of highly negative parent–child interactions at the beginning of the intervention. Teachers and coaches stated that, in these situations, more frequent meetings would have provided additional opportunities to establish a context for parent–child interaction, observe what happened within that context, and offer more feedback or suggestions to parents to improve the interactions. A coach explained,

> One of the things that we were hoping to impact was parent–child interaction. But I didn't feel like . . . we had enough opportunities. Each of the five or six meetings that we had with the parent and the teacher were to include a parent–child activity, but if you think about six times over nine months, to really make an impact on what the parent and child are doing together by being able to observe and coach them or facilitate it . . . that wasn't, in particular, with this child, enough.

Collaborative problem solving and planning. When asked to describe a typical team meeting, nearly all participants described regularly *engaging in a process* of collaborative problem solving and planning. Parents and teachers

mentioned sharing specific information about children's skills and/or behaviors, choosing one or more goals as a focus for intervention, brainstorming strategies for home and school to promote children's attainment of goals, making a plan for working toward the goals until the next team meeting, and/or discussing how children's progress toward their goals would be measured. One teacher described how she prepared for such a meeting, "Before I go out for a home visit, I usually write down [that] we're going to talk about the goals. We're going to talk about the progress . . . what's worked." A mother said, "We have the goals (for the child) . . . and talk about that. Everyone pitches in ideas." One parent, however, did not articulate engaging in a collaborative process in the team meetings. When asked to describe a typical meeting, this parent only recalled that she received information from school assessments of her child.

Often, the *Getting Ready* collaborative process promoted discussion regarding goals for children's communication, cognition, academic skills, or positive social behaviors. One phenomenon that emerged in this analysis was that some teams initially chose different goals for intervention in the home and school settings. By the middle of the first year of participation in *Getting Ready*, however, parents and teachers had *converged* upon the same goal for both environments. For one team, the first goal for the child in the home setting was to write his name, while in the school setting, the goal was to transition successfully to the next activity in the school routine. While both goals held value for the child and adult members of the team, having disparate goals did not tap into the power of bringing parent and teacher together to work on a singular goal using similar strategies. As initial goals for the child were achieved, the team set new goals. By mid-year, this team documented that the goal for the child in both home and school settings was to use words and make eye contact when asking for things. The team devised a set of strategies for use across environments that tapped into the child's interests to create motivation and provide positive reinforcement for the desired behaviors.

Collecting data to make decisions. Typically, team meetings closed with the development of a specific plan for measuring the progress toward each goal and choosing optimal home and school routines wherein the adults could prompt and the children could practice the desired skills/behaviors. The plan included procedures for collecting information about the effectiveness of the strategies. This element of collecting data from both parents and teachers for the purpose of making decisions emerged as one of the most challenging aspects of the collaborative problem-solving and planning process.

Data-based decision making has rich support in educational and behavioral literature (Fuchs, Deno, & Mirkin, 1984; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008). EI coaches in the present study guided teachers and parents to define goals in measureable terms and to collect baseline data prior to beginning the use of strategies. Coaches also assisted teachers and parents in setting up rubrics, rating scales, and charts in efforts to tailor data collection to children's goals and/or adults' interests and needs. In general, teachers were more adept at data collection than were parents, likely because of the greater familiarity with and training in data collection that teachers experience as part of their professional development. Teachers tended to use team-developed rating scales with regularity, and often brought additional data such as GOLD™ assessment ratings and work products to team meetings. Teachers and EI coaches expressed beliefs regarding the value of the data collected to *inform teams' decisions*. One teacher said, "It's nice to see we have all this data to give them [staff from the child's future elementary school] to make it easier for his transition and hopefully easier for the kindergarten teacher next year." An EI coach shared this about a teacher: "Collecting data [for the child] caused her to notice his [need for] basic communication skills such as making eye contact and using words rather than gestures." Data collection and use of the data, however, did not come easily to all teachers. One EI coach noted, "Implementing something that was . . . data-based and record-keeping just doesn't flow naturally from her personality." In this case, the coach reportedly took an active role in simplifying the intervention design and data collection system for the teacher's use.

Collecting data regarding their children's behavior was a new experience for all the parents interviewed. One parent regularly used the rating scales developed at her team meetings over the course of the school year, and another parent used a chart system for several consecutive weeks. In addition, all parents reportedly communicated observations regarding their children verbally to teachers during team meetings. However, collecting systematic written data from most parents in a consistent fashion over the course of 2 years proved to be difficult.

Teachers and EI coaches often worked to devise user-friendly data collection systems in conjunction with parents, and it was frustrating and perplexing when these systems were not used consistently at home. In spite of these *challenges*, teachers continued efforts to gather important parental perspectives regarding children's progress toward targeted goals. One teacher began collecting data from the communication notebook that was going back and forth between school and home, noting the parent's comments in the notebook as evidence of the child's progress toward the goal or lack thereof. Another teacher prompted a parent to add information to a rating scale, kept in the classroom, when the parent brought her daughter to school.

Parents were forthcoming about the challenges they encountered collecting data as shown in the following quotes:

> I'm behind on charting, so it's blank right now, which looks really bad.

> The coach is really good with working with me about it, because I don't always have the time to sit down and fill out the reports and whatnot. So we go over it and she does her assessment, and then we call that good.

Coaches stated that they believed parents to be reliable verbal reporters of their children's behaviors and skills; the most efficient way to gather data was often by simply asking parents how their children were doing. One coach said,

> I had more than one family where the capacity of this sort of "data collection" was not there, but yet, they were observers and when we talked they could say what helped and what didn't help, but it's not the kind of data we scientific people think we would like.

Social Validity of the Getting Ready *Intervention*

Three themes emerged regarding the social validity of the intervention: (a) team members valued academic and behavioral goals, (b) children's challenging behaviors were chronic in nature, and (c) several of the *Getting Ready* intervention's impacts were durable.

The value of academic and behavioral goals. All of the teams identified *academic goals* for the children at some point during Year 1. These included writing one's name; recognizing and identifying letters, numbers, and shapes; writing numbers; naming colors; and associating sounds with letters. Three of the four teams also selected goals for children related to improving home and/or classroom *behavior*, including using words to share and take turns, accepting "no" from adults, following adult directions, following a bedtime routine, completing household chores, sitting still and focusing for 5 min, participating in classroom activities, transitioning from one routine to another, interacting with peers, and increasing attention span.

Most participants selected both behavioral and academic goals for the children over the course of Year 1. When asked to identify which goal they felt was most important, participants overwhelmingly reported that behavioral goals targeted the children's highest needs. In interviews, participants described the following behavioral goals as *priorities*: cooperating with home routines, reducing tantrums, "trying to get her to listen," "accepting what the teacher wants him to do," "controlling his emotions," and "learning to be self-sufficient and do stuff on his own."

The chronic nature of challenging behaviors. Participants reported that the children's positive behaviors were priority targets; however, parents and teachers found it challenging to ameliorate all these behaviors across home and school settings. After more than a year of involvement in *Getting Ready*, despite some improvements in all the children, parents and/or teachers continued to report regularly dealing with chronic, challenging behaviors, in particular, noncompliance, defiance, disruptions within school and community settings, limited attention span, and physical aggression. One teacher described a child as rarely displaying noncompliant behavior at school (once or twice a semester), but she reported this about the child's behavior at home: "I think mom's having more issues at home that are, for mom, a lot more concerning. She just flat out won't do anything for mom, often." For another child, behavior at home was much improved, but was still difficult at school. The teacher shared that her staff had observed this child did not seem to think classroom rules applied to him:

> That's kind of what we see: He just wants to run, he wants to yell, he wants to hit, and he understands . . . he's so incredibly smart, he understands what we want to do but his behavior gets in his way of his regular day of finishing out a request.

Participants described implementing a number of *evidence-based strategies* selected to promote positive child behaviors. These included adhering to a routine, providing positive reinforcement for desired behaviors (e.g., social reinforcement, stickers on a chart), adding visual supports (e.g., classroom schedule, classroom or home rules, If . . . then strips, social stories, cue cards for problem solving), planned ignoring (e.g., going into an adjoining room when child engaged in temper tantrums), providing warnings of transitions, and engaging children in triage several times throughout the day (e.g., an adult asks the child a series of questions that are designed to check the child's emotional status and remind the child of behavioral expectations). EI coaches played an integral role on teams by assisting teachers and families in the design and use of these strategies through sharing information about evidence-based practices, creating materials, and observing and providing feedback regarding implementation at home and school.

Participants reported success with the strategies. One teacher commented about two children from her classroom: "He does better with warnings and we have a pretty set routine here. He's one of those kids who does better when he knows what's coming next."

> He is a very big visual learner and I think without it [visual schedule], he would be lost. He's got great communication skills for his age, but it seems like if he doesn't have those pictures to learn he struggles quite a bit in the classroom.

However, participants also reported that, for some children, the strategies worked intermittently or lost effectiveness over time. One teacher said, "You just had to have a variety of interventions to keep her attention." Another teacher had these observations to share about a child whose response to intervention was particularly *inconsistent*:

> He gets very excited about using new things, and we try to make it very positive, but everything we give him or that we have him do really just fizzles out and it's not new anymore and then it no longer works.

These comments illustrate the chronic nature of the children's challenging behaviors. While *incremental, functional improvements* were seen for all children in home and/or school settings, change to more positive behaviors often occurred slowly, required systematic intervention over time, and was marked by children periodically regressing and displaying the challenging behaviors they used in the past. A teacher summed up this phenomenon by stating, "Most days it works. Some days it's harder where we have to physically remove him from a center because he just won't accept it."

Durable impacts of the intervention. Participants reported several areas of growth for the children and themselves, in spite of the children's persistent challenging behaviors. These improvements were noted as the children completed preschool and during kindergarten.

Children. Prior to kindergarten entry, all four children were described as making progress with social–emotional/behavioral, academic, and language development to some degree, thus improving their readiness for formal schooling. Participants used such descriptors as: "calmer, more mellow," "her attention span has increased," "more patient," "he played with other kids," "he could communicate a lot better," "he can stay in small group," "his 'upset time' is shorter," "she's gained a lot of confidence," and "he can physically stop and consider his choices." They described academic progress using these terms: "learning a lot more letters," "he can recognize his name," "she'll write her name, without even looking at anything," and "names four shapes." A teacher described one child as ready to read and count double-digit numbers. A parent said,

> [My daughter's] developed more. She's just very eager about a lot of things. She wants to read more, she wants to do all kinds of things. She can't wait to get to preschool [each day]. It's just exciting knowing that she's developed so much.

By the end of kindergarten, two families continued to report satisfaction with their children's learning, particularly in the areas of math and reading. One mother shared, "He wants to learn and he's super smart and wants to know. He sinks it all in, even if you think he's not paying attention. Oh, he is!" One parent, however, reported her child was experiencing ongoing academic difficulties and that the school was providing more intensive support for reading, while she was helping the child with homework activities sent home by the teacher. All three families stated that their children had made friends in kindergarten and sought out peer interactions. A mother said,

> I think that she really tries hard on making friends. And I tell her that she doesn't need to try so hard. Because sometimes when you try so hard, it doesn't work out. I said, "Just be yourself." I just think she has a really outgoing personality. She's a leader, she's really strong in what she wants.

Parents, teachers, and/or EI coaches of all four children, however, recognized that although the children had made functional improvements, they continued to lag behind their peers in some area of development, including social–emotional, behavioral, and/or academic skills. One preschool teacher described her student's uneven development:

> [His mom] does a wonderful job trying to get him to excel in his academic [skills], and he's way over where I even think a kindergartner should be. But socially, he's low. And he can't function in a classroom. And so I've been really working with the social–emotional part in the classroom.

In addition, parents and teachers came to recognize that in the face of persistent challenging behaviors, some children would need ongoing support for positive behavior. An EI coach shared this teacher's experience with her target child:

> The teacher came to the realization . . . that he needs some sort of strategy all the time. So . . . last year, I don't think we realized how pervasive his behaviors were. We put the visuals in place. We put the consequences in place, and by the end of the year, he was doing pretty well, in fact, she had withdrawn the visuals. But then he came back in the fall, and we kind of had to start over again.

Thus, it was not surprising that follow-up interviews pointed to ongoing issues with children displaying some challenging behaviors in kindergarten. Parents described aggressive (e.g., hitting a peer, head-butting a peer, throwing shoes) and impulsive behaviors, difficulty focusing, and refusal to participate in kindergarten activities. High activity levels were also reported: "She's a wild child." "He will . . . literally run around in a circle, because he just can't sit still." One child had been suspended for one school day on two separate occasions.

Parents. During the 2 years of intervention, parents reported growing in their sensitivity to their children's needs for structure, attention, positive reinforcement, and socialization opportunities at home. Parents commented, "Even on the weekends, [we] just try to keep routine, otherwise, you get him out of routine and it throws his day off." "We have snuggle time before bed." and "I'd take them to the park so they could play [with other children]." EI coaches and teachers reported observing parents acting

more intentionally over time in supporting the learning of their children (e.g., buying children educational books and toys, assisting children with academic tasks, and regularly reading to children).

Interviews with three parents revealed ongoing attention to nurturing their kindergarten children, supporting their learning, and incorporating development-instigating activities in daily life. Parents reported listening to children read and helping them "sound out" words. One mother helped her child improve writing skills by providing models of correct letter formation. All parents had supervised and supported homework and shared examples of taking their children out to explore and learn in the community: "I try to do more things . . . like go to the Children's Museum or to the zoo. I could sit at home and be OK with it, but he needs to see the outside world."

Parents' abilities to interact with their children in warm, sensitive, and development-instigating ways, however, fell on a continuum. While three parents reported improvements in these abilities in fairly substantial ways during their engagement in the *Getting Ready* intervention, professionals reported concern about one parent. A coach expressed this:

> It is very hard to know what growth there would have been in parent efforts without *Getting Ready*, but I don't feel extremely confident about the parent's growth in effort[s] to teach, pay attention to, positively reinforce, and set limits for [her] child using age-appropriate, contextually appropriate guidelines.

Parents reported feeling comfortable communicating with their children's kindergarten teachers and expressed the notion that they continued to partner with educational professionals to support their children's ongoing development. When asked whether she would change anything about her relationship with her child's kindergarten teacher, one mother said, "I think we have a pretty good relationship and if anything's on my mind or whatever, I can just call her."

Teachers. Over the course of their first year in the *Getting Ready* project, teachers became adept at utilizing strategies to strengthen parent–teacher partnerships. One EI coach said,

> I think they've [the teacher and parent] figured each other out. And it seems like the level of support, meaning how often the parent contacts are and the communication that's going on in between, seems to meet their needs.

One teacher spoke of generalizing these partnership-building skills for use with all of her student's families, not just those participating in the *Getting Ready* intervention. She said she valued "having the parents be involved in setting the goals and getting their opinions more . . . getting their input. I've carried that over to some other kids in general." Teachers gained a deeper understanding of children's home environments and family challenges. A coach shared this observation: "The teacher had very specific ideas about what was happening at school, but it was new to her to think about what might be happening at home and what…the influences [on school might] be." One teacher described gaining a more positive perspective of the parent as a result of this process: "[This parent] has done everything that she possibly can do with her child. And I wouldn't have known that without going into the home and actually working with her."

All teachers assumed roles as facilitators of the collaborative planning process to some degree during Year 1, and fully in Year 2. One teacher actively led team meetings after just a few months of participating in the project. Teachers became more reliant on data as a means of sharing children's progress with parents. An EI coach shared, "She's really taken into the data collection. She's always had hers [data reporting sheets], and they've been pretty accurate from what I've observed in the classroom." Another teacher preferred to collect and share work samples to show a child's academic progress: "I've got a whole bunch of examples . . . a month ago, this is how it [the child's writing] looked, but look at how it looks this month."

In summary, qualitative inquiry into the experiences of these participants in the *Getting Ready* intervention yielded important findings regarding the process of this intervention as well as its social validity for children with challenging behaviors, and their parents and teachers. Essential targets of the intervention, namely, improved parent–professional partnerships, more positive parent–child interactions, and collaborative team problem solving and planning were reported by parents, teachers, and EI coaches. In addition, the social validity of *Getting Ready* was confirmed by participants valuing the academic and behavioral goals established for these children, the desire of parents to enter into and continue partnerships with teachers to address chronic behavioral challenges, and reports of the intervention's impacts during children's kindergarten year. One coach captured the essence of the process when she said,

> The strengths-based nature of [*Getting Ready*] is important, but I think paradoxically when parents or families are not looking very strong, that having that as a touch point all the time—where are the strengths, what's the potential, what's working, what could work—even when things aren't going well . . . moves people toward something more positive.

Discussion

The *Getting Ready* intervention provided a valuable structure for addressing the needs of young children with challenging behaviors and their families through the establishment and nurturing of parent–teacher partnerships. When preschool teachers were trained and received support

from EI coaches to utilize *Getting Ready* strategies, the teachers confidently supported families' abilities to focus on children's strengths, as well as their learning and behavioral needs. Families regularly reported more positive interactions with their children, more consistency in setting behavioral limits, and a greater ability to maximize development-instigating experiences found in regular family life. Parents and teachers expressed that they had established mutually satisfying relationships, characterized by open communication, trust, and appreciation for characteristics each brought to the partnership.

Evidence showed that parents continued to seek partnerships with school staff to promote their children's development as the children entered kindergarten, implying that an initial early investment in the *Getting Ready* intervention may continue to pay off as children who are at risk of school failure enter formal educational settings. With this population of children, such partnerships are crucial as the behavioral challenges of some children, while possibly ameliorated by their preschool experiences, tend to be chronic. While the children in the present study matured and were more responsive to adult guidance as they aged, their parents demonstrated ongoing interest in improving the children's focus, participation in routines and activities, and social interactions with peers and adults through kindergarten.

Collaborative problem solving and planning played an essential role for these partners for identifying children's needed skills in home and school environments, selecting evidence-based practices for encouraging such skills, and monitoring children's progress toward goals. This study demonstrated that teams engaged in ongoing, productive discussions regarding children's learning opportunities and responses to interventions. This harnessed the power of focusing efforts across home/school environments for children with challenging behaviors.

Systematic collection of data to inform team decision making, however, proved to be an ongoing challenge for some teachers and many parents. Charts and checklists were the most frequently tried methods of data collection. Preschool teachers varied in their comfort levels with developing and using such instruments, and parents reported intermittent use of these tools. In addition, no parents reported ongoing use of data to inform decisions either at home or in conjunction with their children's kindergarten teachers (who were not trained in the intervention strategies). Parent–professional collaboration around data collection and analysis was identified as one area wherein some teachers would benefit from more in-depth professional development and coaching support. Further research into effective reporting mechanisms or use of technologies such as social media for gathering parent documentation of behavioral strategies would be helpful in strengthening the data-based decision-making process.

Getting Ready was designed to enhance the ability of established preschool programs to improve school readiness of at-risk children and their families. Thus, program structures dictated the number of family contacts expected by teachers and EI coaches. Further investigation is needed regarding the dosage of the *Getting Ready* intervention that would be optimal for the population of children who display challenging behaviors. The support provided parents through the programs' schedule of six contacts per year seemed inadequate for some families. As teams engage in the *Getting Ready* process and evaluate children's response to intervention, teams may conclude that some children with challenging behaviors, their parents and/or preschool teachers would benefit from more intensive, individualized support. This could, potentially, be delivered through the *Getting Ready* framework. For example, EI coaches could lead functional behavioral assessments and provide additional professional development to team members for devising and implementing behavioral plans based on these assessments. Teams may need to meet more frequently than six times per year to review and monitor such plans. EI coaches may need to continue partnering with parents and teachers through children's transitions into kindergarten, to provide continuity of care for some children with challenging behaviors.

Limitations

This study examined data collected from four cases of children displaying challenging behaviors who participated in the *Getting Ready* intervention for 2 complete years, and follow-up interviews conducted during the children's kindergarten year for three of the four cases. Additional cases were not available for participant interviews because the children or their preschool teachers had exited the program prior to Year 2 of the project. Therefore, the sample of children and families was limited.

Conclusion

For the participants in this study, the *Getting Ready* intervention offered a process that addressed children's challenging behaviors in several key ways. First, the approach provided tools needed for teachers to promote positive parent–child interactions by enhancing parents' abilities to respond warmly to children, set appropriate limits, and offer development-instigating home experiences. Second, parents and teachers were prompted to jointly identify and address specific concerns for children's academic and social–emotional development utilizing a process of collaborative problem solving and planning. In addition, some beginning competencies were demonstrated by teachers for employing data-driven decision-making processes to evaluate the effectiveness of these plans. This collaborative

parent–teacher partnership nurtured parents' active involvement in their children's development and promoted parents' competence in serving as their children's educational advocates. All of this has the potential to advance these children's social, emotional, and behavioral skills in the present, as well as the future.

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