



# I. A.C.C.E.P.T. M.E.: Strategies for Developing Teacher Acceptance when Working with Children who Challenge

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## Abstract

The growing frequency, duration, and intensity of children's challenging behaviors makes general and special education teachers' professional lives hazardous to their health. The focus of this article is on helping teachers leave the classroom each day with a feeling of accomplishment and a belief that they have made a difference in the lives of the children they teach. Using the acronym, I ACCEPT ME, nine strategies are suggested to help teachers accept themselves regarding their competence in teaching children who exhibit behavioral and emotional challenges.

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## Keywords

self-acceptance, discipline, behavior, emotional disorders

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Teachers often express thoughts and feelings of inadequacy in the midst of the trials and tribulations displayed by children exhibiting a wide range of behavioral excesses and deficits. They question whether their abilities prevail and their knowledge and skills stay intact during challenging times in the classroom. The following account typifies the sentiments of those teachers: “I don’t know what I am doing wrong. I can’t get Tommy and Mario to sit still. Nikista refuses to join the group. Farrell becomes extremely oppositional if he does not get exactly what he wants when he wants it. Half the class seems to be more and more unruly. It is becoming increasingly apparent that I made the wrong professional choice. I sure don’t seem to be cut out for teaching. I am just no good at teaching. I don’t measure up.”

Unlike many teachers who question their competence, physicians often remain confident in their abilities when faced with medical challenges. Even with all the advances made in the medical field, patients perish every day. The most talented and skilled surgeons still lose at the operating table. Physicians are taught that death is part of the cycle of life and that not every diagnosis results in a miraculous cure. They know to remain confident in their competence and embrace thoughts and feelings of self-acceptance.

A constant in medicine is that patients will face illness. A constant in education is that students will misbehave. Discipline problems have been a concern expressed by teachers in the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll for decades (Rose & Gallup, 2006). The frequency and intensity of children’s behavioral challenges continue to increase. Research

confirms these impressions (Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman & Gregory, 2009). Children at younger and younger ages are demonstrating more and more inappropriate behaviors (Phillips, Hensler, Diesel & Cefalo, 2004). Gilliam (2005) reported that 4,000 state pre-kindergarten programs were expelled at a rate more than three times that for elementary and high school students.

The growing frequency, duration, and intensity of children’s challenging behaviors make general and special education teachers’ professional lives more hazardous to their health. Emotional disturbance, sleep disorders, professional burnout, job dissatisfaction, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, and feelings of inadequacy prevail among more and more teachers (Abrams, 2005).

This article identifies strategies to help teachers accept themselves regarding their

competence in teaching children who exhibit behavioral and emotional challenges. It is an article designed to help teachers look in the mirror every morning before school begins and say, “It is I!” to the question posed in the timeless classic, *Sleeping Beauty*, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?” However, in this case, the more appropriate question is, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who remains competent when faced with daily brawls?”

Self-acceptance, in this case, reflects a teacher’s acceptance for self regardless of children’s misbehavior. However children present themselves, whether they are well behaved or whether they are presenting their most challenging behaviors, teachers can learn to accept themselves and to leave the classroom each day with a feeling of accomplishment and a belief that a difference was

***Strategies are necessary to promote teacher self-acceptance among those competent teachers.***

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made in the lives of children. Just as the oncologist leaves the clinic each day knowing that he has put forth his best efforts, so can teachers leave the classroom with confidence that the effort spent was put forth with knowledge and skill that transcends the immediate results shown by a child's behavioral difficulties.

It is also recognized that self-acceptance fits into a larger context. It would be grossly inappropriate to suggest that teachers practice self-acceptance with little regard to demonstrating the competence to utilize best, evidence-based practices. An "I'm O.K./You're O.K." attitude when faced with chronic misbehavior must be complemented by teacher competence. The competent teacher must create a learner friendly physical environment, make children feel important, help children develop a sense of capability, nurture belongingness, implement developmentally appropriate curricula for teaching content, and demonstrate many additional developmentally appropriate practices (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2004). In other words, competence is necessary but not always sufficient. There are competent teachers who suffer from a lack of self-acceptance when faced with an increasingly diverse student population. Ms. Bomar was one of those teachers. In one particular discussion, Ms. Bomar exclaimed, "I have no business being a teacher." This is the same Ms. Bomar recognized by her peers for the teaching excellence award the year before. Ms. Bomar was at her wits' end when Trudy bit Troy for the third time during the week. She expected a call from the principal and parents. Ms. Bomar was right. The parents scheduled an appointment to visit with the principal and teacher. This was another example that reinforced Ms. Bomar's thoughts and feelings about her inadequacy and incompetence as a

teacher. While Ms. Bomar's self-rejection spiked, her self-acceptance plummeted.

Self-acceptance by teachers like Ms. Bomar is critical. As behavior challenges in the classroom increase, challenges to the psychic of teachers grow. Yes, strategies are necessary to ensure teacher competence. Equally important, strategies are necessary to promote teacher self-acceptance among those competent teachers. This article is for those teachers who desperately need to hear the inner voice that whispers firmly, "I do measure up even when faced with children who challenge."

### **Eight Key Strategies to Promote Self-Acceptance**

#### **1. Insist that I am a Difference Maker**

Teachers who see themselves as difference makers are more likely to maintain an attitude of tolerance (Richardson & Shupe, 2003). Subsequently, it becomes increasingly important for teachers to apply strategies for seeing themselves as difference makers. Journaling is an effective strategy for reinforcing the fact that teachers are difference makers. Ms. Bomar's principal encouraged her to write down the daily successes in the classroom about the two children, Trudy and Troy. The principal also encouraged the development of a support network between Ms. Bomar and a colleague, Ms. Cain. The journaling and encouraging words from Ms. Cain's helped Ms. Bomar pay closer attention to the incremental successes in the behaviors of Trudy and Troy. Ms. Bomar wrote the incremental successes down every day in a notebook she kept in her desk. After two weeks, she read through all her entries and noted to herself that she did, in fact, make a difference in the lives of her children, including Trudy and Troy.

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There are no guarantees that children with behavioral and emotional challenges will behave for competent teachers. However, there is a guarantee that competent teachers make a difference in the lives of all children. Just as the pediatrician can be competent without lowering the high fever of a child, teachers can be competent without reducing the number of temper tantrums during the first several weeks of school.

## **2. Accentuate Your Effort over Ability, Luck, or Difficulty Level**

Attribution theory posits that individuals seek causes for events in their environment and that these perceived causes influence subsequent behavior. Most individuals explain results of performance in one of the following four ways – effort, ability, task difficulty level, and luck (Cooper, 2005; Duval, Silvia, & Lalwani, 2001; Kulinna, 2007).

Teachers who attribute their performance to effort believe success is due to their hard work and failure is due to their lack of effort. If they attribute their performance to ability, they believe success is due to their high ability and failure is due to their low ability. If they attribute their performance to task difficulty, they believe success occurs because the task is easy and failure results because the task places unreasonable demands on their current level of knowledge. Finally, if teachers attribute their performance to luck, they believe success reflects their good luck and failure their bad luck.

An important step for promoting self-acceptance is for teachers to attribute success to effort rather than luck, task difficulty, or

ability. Ms. Bomar’s principal required all his teachers to submit examples of their successful efforts for guiding difficult children at the end of each week. He published the examples for all to see the next week. This was the principal’s way to accentuate their efforts. Persistence increased since the teachers learned to make effort-oriented statements. In fact, one teacher exclaimed, “There’s no luck in my good teaching!” The principal had the following comment published for all to see, “Ms. Borum increased academic time on-task by 60% this week using a musical prompt for encouraging persistence.” Such school-wide affirmations about their efforts encouraged them to analyze what they changed about their performance. Those positive affirmations did much to promote self-acceptance.

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## **3. Check for Behavior Reductions First and Foremost**

In most instances, the higher mountains have much steeper paths. There are many novice hikers who refuse to take the first step up the mountain path when the mountain appears too steep. The hiker might express, “I am already worn out by just looking up the trail.” Teachers can find similar thinking when faced with children who challenge chronically. Children who throw daily temper tantrums, make demands from the beginning to the end of the day, cry at the smallest mistake, and refuse to perform can appear like the steep mountain to many teachers. Teachers often exclaim, “The challenges I have this year just seem too insurmountable. I don’t know where to start!” In such instances, teachers tend to give up before the first at-

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tempt to transform what seems impossible to probable.

A strategy designed to combat such a defeatist view involves the idea of reduction rather than elimination. Challenges that reflect a wide range of excesses and deficits cannot be easily eliminated within a short period of time. Children do not and cannot just turn off temper tantrums like the change of a light switch. It can become most disheartening to wait for elimination when elimination comes ever so slowly. Teachers want to see progress.

In one particular school, teachers were encouraged to focus on the reduction of three things – frequency, duration, and/or intensity. It was a second grader who demonstrated approximately five several minute temper tantrums per day at a severe level of intensity. The second grade teacher resisted the thought, “I will eliminate the temper tantrums within the week.” Instead, she focused on behavioral baby steps trying to reduce the frequency, shorten the duration, and lower the intensity level. Zirpoli (2005) suggests that such improvements must be reinforced. The teacher was absolutely thrilled to observe those behavior baby steps. Hope and optimism became contagious and the same effort used to reduce the frequency of temper tantrums eliminated the temper tantrums altogether within two weeks.

#### **4. Count Thoughts of Inadequacy as a Blessing Rather than a Barrier**

Teachers are expected to help children appreciate and accept themselves regardless of deficiencies and weaknesses. Such expectations are equally applicable for teachers. Teachers responsible for children who exhibit severe behavior excesses and deficiencies and/or academic deficits are prime candidates for thoughts and feelings of inadequacy.

A new graduate, Mr. Evans, placed in a resource room exemplified such an example. The teacher graduated with the knowledge and skills to work effectively with children from diverse behavioral backgrounds. His confidence in his competence was another story. The teacher was heard saying at the beginning of the year, “I sure thought I was better than I am.” This rude awakening jolted the teacher’s self-acceptance and compromised his knowledge and skills for demonstrating best practices. While these situations are never comfortable, they don’t always have to puncture or threaten thoughts of self-acceptance. In fact, the thoughts and feelings that sabotage self-acceptance can actually be a blessing rather than a barrier in teaching.

While thoughts and feelings of inadequacy can be detrimental, the thoughts and feelings can also be a launching pad for positive change. The difference lies in how teachers respond to the behavioral adversity. Teachers who solicit help during times when they feel insufficient and inadequate find the silver lining within the challenge. In the case of the new teacher, Mr. Evans, his weaknesses were transformed into increased knowledge, enhanced skills, greater confidence, and increased self-acceptance. Abrams (2005) suggests that too many teachers succumb to the negative effects of challenges before they use the challenges to promote growth. Mr. Evans used a strategy introduced by a teacher colleague called “Bless You.” The strategy was a far better strategy than the “Ain’t I awful” game. Mr. Evans’ colleague recognized him playing the “Ain’t I awful” game when she overheard him state, “If there is a bad apple award, I’m in the running.” The colleague remembered some encouraging words written by Parker Palmer (1998). Palmer suggested that teaching teachers how to demonstrate

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vulnerability is a critical strategy for helping develop self-acceptance in the midst of trial and tribulation. According to Palmer, teachers willing to demonstrate vulnerability demonstrated more authenticity and self-acceptance. Teachers who can accept their inadequacies are more inclined to demonstrate their adequacies to compensate and transform their weaknesses into their strengths. In other words, Mr. Evans found that thoughts of inadequacy could be a greater blessing for learning than a barrier to learning. It is what John Maxwell (2000) called failing forward. In terms of Maxwell's definition for failing forward, Mr. Evans began to fail forward when he learned from his mistakes rather than repeat them. He recognized failure as part of the progress rather than expecting never to fail. The worst strategy is for teachers to seek out the company of those who are quick to play the blame-game and attribute the challenging behaviors to the children, families, or the lack of administrative support. The latter approach steals from teachers the opportunities to soar from adversity.

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## **5. Eliminate Your Thought Distortions**

Teachers have significant influence on their thoughts and feelings of rejection or acceptance. This simple idea can be life changing in the classroom. Emotions stem from thoughts. It is this way for teachers who feel adequate or inadequate. The encouraging word is that teachers can help themselves understand that significant changes in their actions are just a thought away.

Many teachers fall prey to patterns of thinking that distort reality. In his book, *Ten Days to Self-Esteem*, David Burns (1993) out-

lined a variety of thought distortions that interfere with logic. The All-or-nothing thinkers see things in black-and-white categories. The Defeatist thinkers view negative events as never-ending patterns impossible to change, whereas Negative thinkers dwell only on the negatives to the exclusion of the positives. The Fortune-Tellers make dire resistant to change or reinterpretation. Lastly we encourage people who blow things out of proportion, the Magnifiers. Cooper (2005) suggests that these thought patterns rob teachers, and those whom the teachers involve, of the wondrous gift teachers possess – the abilities to recreate situations by changing their thoughts.

The common denominator for the five aforementioned thought distortions is that all five contribute to those thoughts of self-rejection rather than thoughts of self-acceptance. It is hard for the Ms. Bomars and Mr. Evans to feel a sense of acceptance when projecting the worse case scenario in the following exclamations: “This is the worst thing I have ever experienced!” Or “This child's behavior will never improve!” Or “I can't find any good in this child!” Or “I don't think I can ever get any better at handling the child!” Or “I can't see this behavior being any different tomorrow than it is today!” It was not until they began to counterpunch their thought distortions that they began to see an improved prognosis.

One particular strategy useful for challenging thought distortions is called counterpunching (Cooper, 2005). Cooper encouraged teachers to imagine a boxer who relied on counterpunching as his favorite defense. He asked teachers to imagine that first punch by the opposition. Once imagined, Cooper asked that they throw a counterpunch. In this case, it

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was a mental counterpunch designed to ward off thought distortions. “Yes, it is a fight!” Cooper explained. “It is a fight against those thought distortions that become like quicksand to your future growth and development. While the consequences of wading in quicksand may be slow, an inch today, another inch next week, teachers eventually become so deeply buried in the sand that they suffocate with such thinking (Cooper, 2005). Cooper continues to suggest that teachers counterpunch the thoughts using questions such as, “Does history support that the child will never behave?” History never supports such thought distortion.

## **6. Put a Stop to Taking Children’s Behaviors Personally**

“Johnny is just trying to make my life difficult!” It is common to hear such expressions that reflect teachers claim that children cause challenges deliberately. Medical explanations that explain children with Asperger’s Syndrome, ADHD, generalized social anxieties, Depression, and Tourette Syndrome are often discounted or minimized as appropriate explanations for children’s inappropriate behaviors. Most children with special needs are not awakening each morning with bad intentions in mind.

Ms. Anthony’s comment to the school counselor spoke volumes. “I don’t know why Lucas wants to make me mad. It just means missing more recess time in the afternoon. He loves recess.” The school counselor probed a bit and asked, “Might there be other explanations for Lucas’ behavior.” After minutes of discussion, it became apparent to Ms. Anthony that his behavior could be explained differently and that his intentions were not bad.

Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham (2004) are right to suggest that particular teacher be-

haviors such as responsiveness, warmth, supportiveness, acceptance, positive interactions, affection, flexibility, hope, confidence, joy, and honesty impact children’s success. It is very hard for teachers to adopt such behaviors when they adopt the faulty thinking that children with behavioral disturbances misbehave deliberately. Such irrational behaviors are significant saboteurs of teachers’ self-acceptance. Sometimes, one of the best strategies for resisting the “it’s deliberate” game is to replace the game with what one principal called her fact finding tour. The principal asked that her teachers list explanations to children’s misbehavior. Of course, she asked that they exclude, “It’s deliberate.” One particular teacher, Mr. Simmons, couldn’t stop finding far more logical explanations once he refused to play the “it’s deliberate” game. His number one explanation for his children’s challenges was the low interest activities. Once he introduced more exciting activities, the behavior challenges dissipated and his feelings of adequacy elevated.

## **7. Take on Solution Finding as the Focus**

A branch of psychology that can have important implications for teachers who work with children who struggle behaviorally is solution-focused psychology. Solution-focused psychology offers great promise as an approach that shifts the focus from what’s wrong to what’s working (Murphy, 2008). One of the great culprits for self-rejection involves the perception of teachers who see themselves as the problem rather than the solution. Problem-focused teachers are inclined to ask, “What am I doing wrong?” Solution-focused teachers are inclined to ask, “What more can I do right?” The problem-focused teachers ignore the big picture. There are multiple explanations for children’s highly disruptive behaviors, i.e., physical environ-

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ment, children's individual needs and characteristics, family unity, peer interactions, and curriculum. Solution-focused teachers embrace a more forgiving notion that many factors contribute to children's behavioral challenges and that the teachers influence cannot take dominion over all other influences.

Teachers with a solution-focused mindset are also more inclined to accept themselves in the midst of difficult behaviors. It is very difficult for teachers to accept themselves when playing the blame game or falling prey to self-disgust. Blame breeds guilt and guilty thoughts and feelings breed contempt which in turn promotes thoughts of inadequacy.

A primary strategy for solution-focused teachers involves their participation in professional organizations, workshop opportunities, and collaboration with peers. In one particular school setting, the teaching team inventoried their needs and prescribed school-based professional development opportunities. When several teachers found problems in working with children characterized by Asperger's Syndrome, they participated in professional development activities with coaching opportunities. The teaching team was quick to state, "We might not be the problem, but we are sure an important part of the solution." This mindset of self-acceptance made more palatable the positive thinking necessary to work more effectively with children who challenge. In fact, one particular teaching team called themselves the solution seekers. It was a wonderful way to promote a more proactive effort to discovering solutions rather than wallow in the problems.

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## **8. Make Positive Forecasts in the Midst of Present Challenges**

Hope is the desire with the expectation for obtaining what is desired. While many teachers who face challenging behaviors sustain the desire to have things improve, they lose the expectation that things shall ever change. Subsequently, the teachers become hopeless in their quest to eliminate or reduce the frequency, duration, and/or intensity of inappropriate behaviors.

Jerome Groopman (2004), the author of *The Anatomy of Hope*, suggested that patients who faced illness needed to acquire a true hope; a hope that complimented the genuine threat and danger of an illness with the genuine possibility that the illness could be overcome. Dr. Groopman found that patients with true hope needed a mental picture that reflected the assimilating of information about the illness and its potential treatment. According to Groopman, "But hope also involves what I would call affective forecasting – this is, the comforting, energizing, elevating feeling that you experience when you project in your mind a positive future" (p. 193).

Ms. Bomar needed to combat her chronic thoughts of resignation and failure. She needed the comforting, energizing, elevating mental projections that reassure, "I have a positive future in sight." A particular strategy especially helpful for Ms. Bomar involved the use of a hope chart. At the beginning of each week, Ms. Bomar was asked to write her hopes on a chart for particular children. Ms. Bomar wrote one week, "I believe that Abby will join us in circle time and pay attention for 10 minutes." While the hope chart is not a magical strategy, it helped

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heighten Ms. Bomar's expectations and encouraged her to affirm small gains made by Abby while she sat and listened to the circle time story. Ms. Bomar's self-fulfilling prophecy about Abby became a self-fulfilling prophecy about her. Ms. Bomar was heard exclaiming, "I am better than I thought!" This was a wonderful positive forecast not only for Abby, but also for Ms. Bomar.

Teachers who frame their thinking around such positive forecasts are more inclined to accept themselves regardless of children's inappropriate behaviors. This occurs because of their understanding that the present misbehavior is not terminal and there is a better end in mind.

## **9. Expect Differences Between the Mission of Teachers and Mission of Children**

Colin Powell, military hero and former secretary of state, emphasized the importance of having a mission statement. Powell commented, "Once you have a sense of direction, you can select strategies that will help you reach your goals. Without this guiding vision, you are wasting your time." There is no question about the need for teachers to organize their goals and objectives around a mission statement. A strong and clear mission statement helps stabilize the thoughts of teachers around those core thoughts important for children's health and welfare.

A complication in teaching is that children also have missions. Unfortunately, it is common that the missions of teachers and the missions of children differ. Heath and Heath (2007) stated, "No plan survives contact with the enemy" (p. 27). One could also say that no lesson plan survives contact with children.

Teachers may construct their very best lesson plans. However, children have a way of modifying and even compromising such

lessons plans. There are many reasons for such compromises, i.e., children's background experiences, personality, temperament, and most importantly, their developmental characteristics and needs. Teachers have missions for children to walk slowly, talk quietly, share frequently, work independently, and wait patiently. Children's missions include running quickly, talking loudly, responding impulsively, and so forth. Teachers who fail to recognize the differences between the two strongly felt missions become increasingly frustrated. Such frustration aggravates thoughts of self-acceptance when children's challenging behaviors surface due to the different missions between teachers and children. The more teachers understand the differences in mission statements proclaimed by children and their own, the more accepting teachers will become not only for the children, but also for themselves. A good strategy is for teachers to wear the lens of children and see the differences in their expectations compared to the teachers. In fact, one teacher amused her colleagues by recommending they all wear oversized glasses once per week just to remind themselves to see more clearly through the lens of children. While a funny reminder, it worked. Teachers would remind one another, "Of course, they want to be first in line. Who wouldn't at that age?" Or "What child has learned to patiently wait to learn something difficult when adults model a want what I want when I want it mentality?" Berk and Winsler (1995) support this strategy for helping teachers reframe personal expectations so that those expectations are more acceptable to both children and teachers.

One particular teacher used another strategy called the mission diary. The teacher wrote on one side of the page his mission, "John and Mikka will be attentive during the math lesson." On the other side, he wrote,

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“Johnny and Mikka will be inclined to fidget and act impulsively.” The teacher was not just trying to forecast a negative prognosis. He was demonstrating a better understanding of the children’s neurological challenges. The mission diary helped the teacher keep in mind the differences in his mission and the children’s propensity to act contrary to the teachers plan. The use of the mission diary helped the teacher keep in perspective the challenging behaviors. The challenges became much more understandable to the teacher and the teacher became more understanding and accepting of himself.

### **Final Thoughts**

Teachers are leaving the profession at rapid rates and state that a lack of support in dealing with the behaviors of children as one of the primary reasons (Darling-Hammond, 2003). There is no question that teachers feel increasingly vulnerable and inadequate in the classroom. Special educators and general educators are faced with children who have emotional difficulties as well as a variety of other disabilities (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2007). It stands as no surprise that teachers are frustrated and filled with feelings of inadequacy. By accepting themselves and believing in themselves, teachers can know that each day they make a positive difference in the lives of the children they teach. Ask any teacher why he or she went into the profession and the answer is the same, “to make a difference in the lives of children”. By practicing the aforementioned strategies, teachers can leave at the end of each day knowing that a positive difference was made.

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