My role as the coordinator of the Burnaby Supported Child Development Program at the BC Centre for Ability was to support the inclusion of children with extra support needs and ensure their successful inclusion into child care. I was finding that the support was successful for most children, with the unfortunate exception of children who engage in challenging behaviours. I witnessed children as young as three years old being asked to leave both preschools and daycare programs.

Research tells us that children who engage in persistent externalized challenging behaviour can grow up to have serious problems, including expulsion from school, substance abuse, involvement in criminal behaviour, and increased mental health problems (Tremblay, Gervais & Petitclerc, 2008). Child care management and staff have a tremendous responsibility to provide a quality program that fully supports the development of children from a wide variety of backgrounds and from all developmental levels.

Challenging behaviour can mean a lot of things to different people. For the purpose of this article, challenging behaviour is defined as persistent behaviours that impact learning, social interactions, and day-to-day success. This behaviour can include physical aggression, refusal to follow adult instructions, prolonged tantrums, property destruction, and self-harm.

Child care providers use a variety of strategies to support the reduction of challenging behaviours for the children in their programs. Such methods include talking to the child about their behaviour, time away from the group, and redirecting the child to another activity. All of these strategies are used after the behaviour occurs. However, despite these strategies children with persistent difficulties can still suffer rejection, leaving child care providers feeling frustrated and ill-equipped.

Why should we worry so much about these children’s behaviour? Challenging behaviour during the preschool years constitutes one of the strongest predictors of more serious problems later in life (McCabe, & Frede, 2007). Additionally, challenging behaviour in young children can lead to increased academic and social problems in school and later problems integrating successfully in the community (Campbell, 1995). When children engage in problem behaviours they are often rejected by their peers and receive higher numbers of disciplinary actions at home as well as at school.

In 2008 I had the amazing opportunity to be introduced to the evidenced-based model called the Teaching Pyra-
mid. The discovery of the Teaching Pyramid inspired me and really gave me hope. This systematic model offers child care providers a framework and strategies that can increase their confidence and skills in supporting the success of all children including children that engage in challenging behaviours.

The Teaching Pyramid
This model was developed by two American nationally funded programs and is a systematic model that flows from the bottom up. The teaching is different as it is based on research, is systematic, offers practical suggestions, and is focused on putting ideas into practice.

Relationship Development
The lowest level focuses on good quality child care principles; starting off with a strong focus on developing positive supportive relationships with children, families, and, of course, coworkers. (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph & Strain, 2003). Development of supportive trusting relationships with children is the most important foundational task of a child care provider. When a child has an adult who responds to her in a consistent loving manner she is more likely to listen, respond, and seek out positive attention from the adult (Fox, et al., 2003). Developing a successful relationship with a child can be achieved by listening to the child with one’s heart, playing with the child, and engaging in joint interest activities.

High Quality Environments
Just above the bottom level of the pyramid is high quality environments, which further describes the importance of providing a quality environment within the classroom. (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph & Strain 2003). This includes not only the physical environment but also aspects that make up the environment such as the routine schedules, rules, and materials used within the classroom. Providing an environment that is welcoming, inviting, and focuses on the needs and interests of the current children is essential in supporting the success of all children in a child care program.

Targeted Social Emotional Skills
The next level of the Teaching Pyramid focuses on teaching social emotional skills. Some children, particularly children who are at risk of developing challenging behaviour, require explicitly planned instruction on social emotional skills (Fox & Hemmeter, n.d). Social skills include turn taking, sharing, recognizing their own emotions and the emotions of others, handling disappointment, dealing with anger, and developing friendship skills. The Teaching Pyramid not only points out the importance of teaching social skills, but the importance of how these skills should be taught. There are many fun, developmentally appropriate tools available to teach and support the development of social skills such as Tucker Turtle, the solution kit, book nooks, and the feeling wheel, all of which can be found at http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html. Other methods include: modelling, use of puppets, singing songs, playing games, prompting, and using children’s literature.

Intense Interventions
The tiers of the Teaching Pyramid so far have been focused on high quality child care for all children and teaching social skills for children at risk. The highest level of the pyramid focuses on the individual needs of those children who have more intensive needs. The most important aspect about the top of the pyramid is a focus on bringing a team together to develop a plan. Team members could include speech, occupational, and physical therapists; supported child development consultant; infant mental health worker; child care staff; and any other community partner that can offer their expertise. This plan is based on the practices of positive behavioural support (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2009). Remember that the Teaching Pyramid is a systematic model, which means ensuring that the bottom levels of the pyramid are in place help increase the likelihood of success in implementation of the individual plan.

Implementing the Principles and Practices of the Teaching Pyramid
Starting in 2008 several child care programs in Burnaby, BC, began the process of fully and systematically working on ensuring all tiers of the Teaching Pyramid are a focus in their child care programs. The Teaching Pyramid is not a philosophy or something you “do.” Rather, it is a systematic framework to support the ongoing development of high quality child care. The child care programs that have begun to implement the principles and practices of the Teaching Pyramid in Burnaby have noticed a reduction in the challenging behaviour in children and increased confidence in staff’s ability to promote a successful environment for all children.

One other aspect of the Teaching Pyramid that made it stand out for me was its focus on supporting child care providers to implement the strategies. We can all
remember attending an amazing workshop full of ideas that sparked our imagination, but then returning to work and doing the same things we always do which, of course, doesn’t change a thing. The research behind the Teaching Pyramid states that coaching can be used to support child care staff to implement what they learn in training. Coaching can consist of external coaching, peer coaching, or self-coaching (National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning, n.d). The coaching cycle includes setting goals, staff using the skills in day-to-day practice, and the coach engaging in focused observation and then reflection and feedback.

For the last year I have been running a project focused on coaching child care programs in Burnaby in the implementation of the Teaching Pyramid once they have completed training. Through this process staff have reported increased team cohesiveness, great confidence, children who are more engaged in play, and a reduction in challenging behaviours exhibited by the children in their programs.

I became interested and involved with the Teaching Pyramid in the hopes of finding a way to help child care staff provide an environment that helps in the reduction of challenging behaviour in children. Over the last few years I have witnessed just that. I know I will be spending the rest of my career exploring the use of the Teaching Pyramid in Canada to promote the inclusion and success of all children in child care and schools.

References


Resources
Centre on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/

Technical Assistance Centre on Social Emotional Development http://www.challengingbehavior.org/

Andrea James has been an early childhood educator for over 25 years and is currently working on completing her Masters in Early Childhood Education at UBC.