Strategies for Managing Difficult Behavior

Use these strategies as you would a toolbox: choose what works best for. Consider practicing these strategies when a group is working together well, in order to build your confidence with using each strategy.

- **Set and enforce ground rules**
  Ask the group for a few ground rules, and make sure everyone agrees with them. In some situations it may be appropriate to set the ground rules yourself. In that case, you still need to get the group to agree with the rules. If someone violates a ground rule, remind him/her of the rule.

- **Use an agenda**
  A shared understanding of what's going to be discussed can help keep everyone focused on the task. Consider putting times on the agenda if there's a need to control the length of discussion.

- **Use active listening skills**
  Paraphrase, summarize, reflect back, probe, encourage, pay total attention, use I-me statements.

- **Reframe the issue**
  Find a way to describe the issue, or ask the question, that allows different opinions to be expressed. Avoid 'yes or no' discussions.

- **Separate myths, facts and values**
  Find common ground by agreeing upon facts and dispelling myths. You may need to 'agree to disagree' on different values. *I understand that you think children need to learn independence, but I place a higher value on structure.*

- **Allow emotions**
  If emotions are running high, validate people's feelings. *I can tell that this discussion is causing some people to be uncomfortable.*

- **Slow down**
  If someone is 'on a tear', break the momentum. Summarize the discussion so far, or ask people to repeat what they've said.

- **Validate**
  Sometimes people just want to be sure they've been heard. *So you're suggesting that . . .* It may help to write the idea down, preferably where everyone can see it.

- **Create a parking lot**
  When someone raises a valid issue or concern that should be addressed at some point, but not right now, 'park' it. Your parking lot should be visible to all participants. Make sure you deal with the issues before the meeting ends, even if it's just to add them to a future agenda.

- **Add structure**
  Put a temporary halt to the discussion in order to impose some order. Options include setting a time limit for discussion; using a process such as round-robin to give everyone a chance to be heard; calling for a vote or discussing how a decision will be made; setting an agenda for the rest of the meeting if you don't already have one.

- **Recruit the group**
  When someone is truly disruptive, ask the whole group for help. *Mr. Jones is making it hard for others to speak. Is this alright with the rest of you?* Often the disrupter is not willing to take on the whole crowd.

- **Take a break**
  Call a 10-minute bathroom break and give everyone a chance to cool off, or if you need time to figure out what to do next.

- **Talk one-on-one**
  During a break, speak one-on-one with those who are exhibiting difficult behavior. Explore what it is they want and whether there are ways you can accommodate their needs. Sometimes a participant doesn't realize how difficult he or she is being. Or it may be that you've been missing the point.

- **Be silent**
  Practice this one: don't speak for at least 15 seconds during a conversation, to get a sense of how long that really is. Then use silence to slow down the momentum and refocus attention. Allow silence to follow a particularly disruptive comment.

- **Check the mood of the group**
  Temporarily stop the discussion. Find out how people are feeling: is the group fatigued? Are people ready to make a decision? Use thumbs up/thumbs down or fist-to-five for a quick indication of the group's mood.

- **Stop the session**
  If things are really out of control, consider aborting the session. How urgent is the matter at hand? The process may benefit from a cooling-down period, a chance to gather more information and new faces at the table.